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# Mercury Mystery BOOK-MAGAZINE

a new novel

# DEADLY CURVES

by edward ronns

The Man Who Almost Stole a Country
by MURRAY TEIGH BLOOM

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by ALAN HYND

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# Mercury Mystery
## BOOK-MAGAZINE


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A New Mystery Novel

*The gripping tale of a treacherous beauty and the two men she turned into fugitives — men whose only chance for freedom lay in their courage to face death . . .*

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# DEADLY CURVES

## *by Edward Ronns*

### CHAPTER ONE

It was dusk when Webbe arrived at the Prince John Cannery. He left his car in the lot behind the old red building and walked across the sandy lawn to where a group of men stood talking in sharp and angry voices.

Beyond them were the piers and oyster boats and the shimmering darkness of the Chesapeake. The opposite shore of Maryland was lost in the hot haze of the summer evening.

Webbe saw that Dig Trury was not with the men near the pier and walked toward the office entrance at the back of the cannery. He was a stocky man in his early thirties, with thick dark hair and an aggressive stride. His lips were clamped tightly shut. One of the men saw him and called, "Yo, Davey." Webbe halted, then joined the others at the dock. There were some sheriff's deputies mingled with the oystermen and employees of the cannery. Their faces were not friendly.

A deputy named Fannett said: "Heard what your brother did, Davey?"



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Webbe nodded. "I heard. I was at the *Call* office." He looked at the state police cars parked near the office entrance. "How badly was Joe Oliver hurt?"

"Bad enough. He may die."

"And Rory shot him?"

"Shot him and took the whole payroll," Fannett said, relishing it. "Forty thousand dollars. Looks like your paper was wrong, trying to get Rory out of jail. Of course, being your brother and all —"

"How did he break out?" Webbe asked.

"It was twenty minutes after you left him this evening. Guess Rory got impatient with the editorials you been writing, Davey. Took the turnkey's gun and came straight here. We got the gun now — he dropped it while he was runnin' away, after he shot the bookkeeper." Fannett was unsmiling. "Rory was a good prisoner until you come back from New York and bought your partnership from Merl Gannon on the *Call*."

"Prince John is my home," Webbe said. "Rory's, too. And everybody knows Rory got too stiff a sentence for what he did."

"The law didn't figure so, but maybe you think your paper is smarter and more important than the law, hey? I hear the new *Journal* is going to give out some right smart back-talk for you."

Webbe said nothing. The unfriendly eyes watched him, a tight semi-circle of hard tanned faces deriving perverse pleasure out of this thing. He wished he hadn't come here. Then he said: "Where is Dig?"

"Inside."

Webbe turned away from the men on the cannery dock and walked to the door marked *Office Employees.*

Sheriff Dig Trury and several troopers were talking to the cannery officials when Webbe stepped inside. They were clustered around an open steel safe. Several desk chairs were overturned and there was a small snowfall of papers in the long aisle between the desks.

Trury saw Webbe come in and said something to one of the troopers and came toward Webbe and took his arm to guide him into a small office nearby. Trury was slim, with gray hair and a tired, intelligent face. He wore a black string tie and a black linen coat. He closed the frosted glass door and spoke in a mild, Eastern Shore drawl that didn't fool Webbe. "Sit down, Davey. You know what happened here, don't you?"

"You'd better tell me," Webbe said. "Don't pull any punches, Dig. Did you call me here officially, or because Rory's my brother, or to help me get the story straight for the Prince John *Call*?"

"Officially. You were with Rory half an hour ago, weren't you?"

"Yes, at the county jail."

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"Was he planning his escape then?"

"How would I know that?"

"I thought he might have said something to you about it."

"I resent that, Dig."

"It can't be helped. I need the facts. You and your paper have claimed that Rory was a victim of Luke Kittinger's stories in Luke's news syndicate when Tom was convicted three months ago. You were over in Korea then, writing those stories that won you the Pulitzer Prize, weren't you? And you worked for Kittinger, too. But what you didn't know was that Rory was carrying on with Kittinger's new wife. You can't blame Luke for being sore and getting the book thrown at Rory. I got the feeling none of this tonight would've happened if you hadn't come back to stir things up."

"That isn't fair," Webbe said.

"You know Rory better than anybody else," said the sheriff. "You two know these swamps and beaches better than most. Where would he hole up?"

"I don't know."

"You want to cooperate with us, don't you?"

"Yes. Naturally." Webbe hesitated. "This isn't easy for me, Dig. I know Rory's a hellion; he always was. But I can't believe this of him." He moved away toward the window, hearing the hum of talk from the troopers and cannery workers in the main office. Trury's face was thin and adamant. If Rory had only been patient, he thought, the Prince John *Call* could have won a new trial for him. He said: "Do you have any idea, Dig, why Rory came straight here after breaking out?"

"For the money. He had it all planned."

"I don't think so," Webbe said. "I think he came here to see his girl, Opal Haines. She works here in the cannery. Maybe he came to see her and learned about the payroll and took it incidentally."

"Maybe."

"Have you put up roadblocks yet?"

"Tighter than a drum. If you know where he is, Davey, and if you can get word to him somehow, you'd better tell him to come in before somebody else gets hurt."

"I don't think Rory means to make trouble."

"He's already made it. And some of it is brushing off on you, the way folks are bound to think. There's a crowd around the courthouse already. It's been a long time since we had this sort of feeling in Prince John. You helped whip it up, with the paper, and I'm surprised your partner, Merl Gannon, let you do it."

"Rory isn't vicious or a criminal," Webbe said. "He never got a fair

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shake because of Kittinger. Is there anything else you wanted to see me about, Dig?"

"I'll talk to you tomorrow. When we see if Joe Oliver lives or dies."

Webbe turned at the door. "Just how did that happen, anyway?"

"Nobody really knows. Oliver's a little mouse, but he stood up to Rory and tried to keep him from taking the money. There was a scuffle, and Oliver was shot and Rory ran, that's all."

"Where did Rory get the gun after breaking out of jail?"

"We don't know, but he had it. And he used it. You know Luke Kittinger is at his summer place for the weekend, don't you?"

"Yes," Webbe said.

"Then figure what Luke is going to make out of this. His newspaper prints its first edition day after tomorrow, doesn't it?" Trury answered himself with a nod. "Figure the headlines he'll use. If that crowd at the courthouse is ugly tonight, they'll be a lot worse after they read Kittinger's stories on this. It's up to you, Davey."

Webbe said angrily: "I wish you'd stop putting it up to me. I don't have Rory in my hip pocket."

"I wish you did." Trury's face told him nothing. "He's your brother. Get hold of him, for his sake — and do it fast."

Floodlights brightened the parking lot behind the cannery when Webbe stepped outside. Nobody was in sight. He got in his car and drove away.

He passed two sand roads that twisted back to the shore, then turned into the third and let the car jounce slowly along the tracks through the black tunnel made by the pines. Life had a way of catching up with everyone, he thought — even Rory. Big, handsome and irresponsible, Rory was an anachronism in this modern day. He belonged to the era of the Southern cavaliers, before the Secession, when a quick temper and a dashing courage were the measure of a man. Webbe knew he was completely unlike his brother. Long ago, when Rory remained here to work intermittently on Merl Gannon's newspaper, Webbe had gone off to New York, landed a spot with Henry Plumm's column syndicated by Luke Kittinger's newspaper chain, and carved a steady, not-too-brilliant career for himself until his break came with the series he wrote on the Korean truce. He had reached the top, with the Pulitzer Prize award, only to have everything fall apart in his hands when he returned.

Stella did it. She had married Luke while Webbe was ten thousand miles away; and not content with that, she had spent the early summer here in Prince John, at Luke's summer place, and discovered Rory. Rory was not the man to ignore a beautiful woman interested in him, and Rory still

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didn't know that Stella had once been engaged to marry Webbe. Rory had grown into a stranger to Webbe in the years he had been away in New York, and he hadn't been able to bring himself to describe Stella as the ambitious woman she really was. Let Rory find it out for himself now.

Maybe coming back to Prince John was a mistake, Webbe thought. It was ironical that he'd have come back anyway, aside from wanting to help Rory, because of the way Stella had jilted him. Even if Rory had been careful, even if Luke Kittinger's jealousy hadn't spurred the man to find out about the affair, he would have come back. Kittinger was not an easy man to cope with. One night Rory had been involved in a lot of drinking with some oystermen, and there was a fight with a gas station attendant up toward Salisbury and a robbery of the station as part of the drunken spree. Webbe heard all this at secondhand, when he first returned from Korea. Kittinger had built the manhunt for Rory into national headlines, venting his jealousy in a vicious drive toward revenge. When Rory was caught, sobered and bewildered, the court threw the book at him and he got a fifteen-year sentence, chiefly due to Kittinger's pressure on the public.

He lit a cigarette, but it tasted stale and bitter and he crushed it out after the first drag.

It wasn't that he believed Rory totally innocent. Rory's streak of wildness was bound to get him in trouble sooner or later. The trouble was with Kittinger, and with Kittinger's new wife. Henry Paul Plumm, in his quiet way, had often said that nothing Luke chose to do with his power was impossible, and none of it was moral or ethical. That hadn't made any difference to Stella's ambitions, of course, but Webbe, through Plumm's bitterness, had often been on the brink of revolt against the type of journalism Kittinger personified. Henry Paul was a broken, brilliant drunkard who talked about ideals and infected Webbe with them. Thinking of Henry Paul, Webbe smiled wryly. Henry was still grinding out stereotyped columns that echoed Luke's philosophy of the mass man, but Webbe was here, with every cent he could beg, borrow and save, sunk into the Prince John *Call*.

Lately he had come to think again of Prince John as his home town, where he wanted to live for the rest of his life. He liked the freedom of being co-owner of the local paper, even though the *Call* seemed to be tottering daily toward bankruptcy. This thing with Rory, on top of everything else, threatened to blow it sky-high. It was like a smoldering stick of dynamite, and he had to snuff it out before it destroyed not only Rory, but himself and Merl Gannon and the Prince John *Call*, too.

Webbe stopped the car and let the echo of the motor die away in the scrub pines. He waited, listening to the night sounds around him, then got

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out and walked down the sand road. A wooden bridge crossed a sluggish stream that wandered like a dark snake through the swamp. Beyond it, the road was passable only on foot, narrowing until the wild hazelnut bushes touched him on either side.

There was a weatherbeaten shack in the dark underbrush that edged the sand. No lights shone in the broken windows. Webbe listened to the quiet murmuring of the surf and the thud of his own pulse, and then walked toward the shack.

Nobody answered his knock on the door. He called Rory's name. He called again, a little louder. When there was no reply he pushed open the door and went into the darkness, reaching in his pocket for a match, and while he had his left hand in his pocket there was a quick movement to one side and he felt his arm gripped and wrenched backward and he stumbled into the hot, stale darkness inside the shack. Something hit the back of his neck and he fell to both knees and felt his arm twisted higher up behind him. He yelled explosively.

"Rory, hold it!"

"Is that you, Davey?"

"Let go of my arm," Webbe said.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Remembered this place, eh?"

Rory relaxed his grip and Webbe rubbed his wrist and stood up. He smelled perfume in the darkness. There was movement on both sides and he turned to the door. Rory's bulk blocked out the patch of moonlight on the water beyond. There were quick tapping steps beside him and Webbe saw a girl standing beside Rory.

"Hello, Opal," he said.

She was young, quick and graceful, with dark blonde hair cut in boyish fashion to the shape of her small head. Her eyes were big, her mouth quiet and competent. She wore a skirt of gray material with a wide belt cinching her narrow waist, and a thin sweater above that revealed her firm, woman's body. There was something about her that was elemental, almost savage. A primitive grace, a dangerous aura.

She smiled. "Davey, you should have kept out of this," she whispered.

"I came here to help."

"We don't need help. You shouldn't have come here."

Webbe said: "Rory, I don't want to argue with you. You made a mistake breaking out of jail. You made it worse for yourself, and impossible for me."

The girl had her slim, tanned hand possessively on Rory's big shoulder. "Don't worry about us, David."

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"Be quiet, Opal," Rory said.

Rory stood six feet three, a rawboned man five years younger than Webbe. He wore a blue chambray shirt and faded dungarees supported by a wide leather belt with a big brass buckle. His hands were empty. He was unarmed. His thick black hair looped down over a flat forehead. He held his left arm as if he had hurt it, somehow, and a crude, bloody bandage was wrapped around it just below the elbow.

Webbe said quietly: "You need a doctor, Rory."

"I'm all right," Rory grinned. His voice was heavy with exhaustion and liquor. He said to the girl: "My big mistake was coming to see you, baby, at the cannery."

"I'm glad you did," Opal said, watching Webbe.

"And taking that money," Rory added.

"It was there, wasn't it? Why not take it?" she argued. "How do you expect to get away without money?" She had a throaty voice, and she held herself to emphasize the sleek curve of her hip. There was a wildness about her in the way she tossed her short-cropped hair. "You need money, Rory, because it's a sure thing your brother won't help you get it made, will he?"

"You know why I'm here," Webbe said. "I want you to give yourself up before it's too late."

Opal laughed. Rory said: "Nothing doing, boy."

"What else can you do?" Webbe asked. "The sheriff and the state cops have roadblocks up all around you. You can't get away."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm in no hurry. There's something I've got to do first, and that's to see Luke Kittinger. I want to talk to that son of a bitch who put me in jail in the first place."

Webbe said: "You're sure it's not Stella you want to see."

"That bitch," Opal said tightly. Her eyes were dark and stormy, gleaming with an angry light. "I'm Rory's girl. He loves me, not that fancy woman. Isn't that right, honey?"

Rory grinned. "Shut up, Opal. Look, Davey, don't think I haven't appreciated what you've done for me with the newspaper. I was willing to string along, but this chance came and I took it, is all."

"Why do you want to see Luke Kittinger?"

"Maybe I want to kill him."

"No," Webbe said. "Don't even think it."

Opal laughed again.

"I'm thinking about it," Rory said. His even white teeth flashed as he smiled, but Webbe sensed danger behind his dark face. "I've got to settle with Luke, and don't argue me out of it, Davey. After I see Luke, I pull out for good. I'll never come back to Prince John."

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"You're a fool. Where did you get the gun you used on Joe Oliver?"

"I found it."

"And did you find the key to your cell, too?"

"You ask too many questions, Davey."

"Let me draw it for you, then," said Webbe. "I'm in a spot because I've visited you at the county jail and because I started Merl Gannon on this campaign to get you a parole. Now Dig Trury thinks I helped you escape. So you're turning yourself in, with me, with no more arguments."

Rory's face was a brooding wedge of shadow in the moonlight. "Honest, Davey, I couldn't help it about Oliver."

"You don't have a gun now, do you?"

"No, but I can get another."

"Forget it," Webbe said. "Come back to the sheriff with me."

"Davey, I'm sorry this gets you in trouble, but I can't go back to that cell for fifteen years just because I got drunk one night, or because Kittinger's wife wanted to play around." He grinned at Opal's obvious anger, then said: "You going to tell the sheriff where I am, Davey?"

"Yes," Webbe said. "I've got to."

"Don't do it, Davey."

The girl moved away to stand in the shadows, leaning on a flimsy slat chair. "Don't let Davey go," she said quickly. "If you made up your mind, Rory, don't let him get the police."

"Let me by," Webbe said to Rory.

He started forward and Rory stood like a bull in his way, head lowered, thick shoulders thrust forward. But there was uncertainty in his face. With the first step, Webbe thought his brother would try to stop him. With the second, Rory shook his head and moved aside. At the same moment there was blur in the darkness and from the tail of his eye, Webbe saw Opal pick up the flimsy chair and throw it. There was no time to duck. He heard her cry of rage and a yell of protest from Rory and then the chair hit him and he went down. On hands and knees, he shook his head and then closed his fingers around a rung of the shattered chair. He heard Rory shout at the girl but he couldn't understand the words and it didn't make any difference. He tried to push up from the floor, but he couldn't make it.

"Take it easy, Davey," Rory said.

"You're stupid and bull-headed," Webbe gasped.

"It wasn't me, it was Opal."

"Will you come back with me, then?"

"I can't do that, Davey."

Webbe tried to get up and swing at him with the chair rung but he missed and Rory grabbed the girl's hand and backed outside. Panting, Webbe

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steadied himself against a table. He heard Rory slap the girl. He called them, but he knew it was useless. When he reached the cabin door, he knew he was alone. Like wild things, Rory and Opal had vanished into the dark brush that edged the beach.

## CHAPTER TWO

At noon the next day Webbe came back to the offices of the Prince John *Call*. It was hot and damp and he carried his coat on his arm as he went up the wooden stairs to the office above the pressroom, and he wondered what he was going to tell Merl Gannon. It was a kick in the teeth, and if he were alone in this, it wouldn't be so bad; but what bothered him was that Merl would take a licking, too, and none of it was Merl's fault. Webbe chose the side door to his office, threw his coat aside, and sat down at his desk as the phone began to ring. It was Merl. "David?"

"Yes, I'm back. I'll be right in," Webbe said.

"Stay there. We've had a lot of phone calls."

Webbe went to the water cooler and drank thirstily. There was a high thin overcast to the west, and he hoped it would rain to relieve the sultry air over the town. He stared at an oil tanker creeping down from Annapolis, and then he turned away as Merl Gannon entered his office.

Gannon was in his sixties, a slender man with gray hair and a weathered face. He had started the Prince John *Call* with Webbe's father, paid an overvaluation for the other share when Webbe's parents died, and then let Webbe have his half of it again for a very nominal sum. He wore a blue serge suit and a high starched collar and a small blue bow tie. The heat didn't seem to bother him. A row of freshly sharpened yellow pencils was neatly aligned in his breast pocket.

"You need a shave, David."

"I shaved this morning," Webbe said. "Before breakfast. It's the kind of beard I have."

"Were you at the Commercial Club and the *Journal* without your coat?"

"Merl, please." Webbe drew a frustrated breath. "The *Journal* goes back to press tomorrow. They've been dead for twenty years, but now they're alive and kicking — kicking us right out of business, it seems."

"Don't talk like that," Gannon said quickly.

"It's true. If Luke Kittinger revives the *Journal*, it's because of me and Rory, and because I used to talk so much about Prince John that he bought

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his summer place here, and because Luke would like to break me so I'd have to come back to his syndicate. The Pulitzer Prize, you know. He didn't want me to quit working with Henry Plumm." Webbe drew a deep breath. "What about the phone calls, Merl?"

"I gathered them up from the switchboard girl," Gannon said. "Six were from Mrs. Luke Kittinger, out on Three Fingers. Very urgent. She wants to talk to you personally, David. I had the girl say you were out on business."

"Good. Keep it that way."

Gannon said quietly: "She's a very beautiful woman."

"I'm aware of that. I don't want to talk to her or see her," Webbe said. "Not today, tomorrow, or any day."

"You sound as if you were afraid of her."

"Maybe I am."

"You'll never get over it by avoiding her," Gannon said.

"Who else called?" He changed the subject.

"Three more cancellations," Gannon said, "including Gort Messinger's department store. The *Journal* is undercutting our rates. If it continues, we're going to sink."

"You mean we'll be scuttled," Webbe said. "Maybe I'd better talk to Gort Messinger myself."

"I doubt if you can change his mind. The last message was from Dig Trury, the sheriff — about your brother. He wants you to call back immediately." Gannon hesitated at the door. "When Mrs. Kittinger phones again, shall I have the girl say you haven't come back yet?"

"Just tell her I'm busy."

"I wish you'd see her and get it over with, David."

"I don't want to see her," Webbe said. "We were friends when we both worked for Luke's syndicate in New York. When she married Luke, that finished it. When she played Rory for laughs, that capped it."

He felt the pressure of futile anger as Gannon quit his office, and went back to the window, trying to decide what to do first. Running a small-town newspaper was quite different from working for Kittinger's big metropolitan syndicate, or handling Henry Paul Plumm's column that was read from coast to coast. Unless Merl could somehow end the wave of advertisement cancellations, they were finished. He had the feeling that more was going on that he didn't understand; and he wished for the thousandth time that Stella Kittinger hadn't tried to get in touch with him; he wished she were back in New York where she belonged. And he wished Rory hadn't broken out of the county jail yesterday. Thinking of this, he turned to the telephone and asked the operator to get him Dig Trury.

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Trury's drawl was deep and tired. "I've been waiting for your call, Davey. The shack you sent me to this morning was empty."

"I told you it would be," Webbe said.

"Has Rory tried to get in touch with you since?"

"No."

"Funny thing, about Joe Oliver," Trury said. "I thought last night he was going to recover, but now I'm worried. Maybe a little scared. According to the headlines in Luke Kittinger's papers, Joe Oliver is at death's door. In quotes."

Webbe was startled. "What does Luke have to do with him?"

"Well, I had Oliver in the hospital last night while the coroner took the bullet out of him, and then I sent him home because he wanted to be with his wife. This morning I hear he isn't home at all, but over at Kittinger's summer house on Three Fingers. Kittinger came for him and insisted Oliver was seriously wounded and took him away and called his personal physician from New York to attend to him. You know Oliver, Davey. Kittinger scared the hell out of him, and maybe now Ollie really thinks he *is* dying."

Webbe said bitterly: "So Luke is making more headlines out of Rory's troubles. Have you tried to get in touch with Oliver, at Kittinger's place?"

"Nobody admitted. Doctor's orders." Trury grunted. "I'm just a small-town cop, Webbe, same as you chose to be a small-town newspaperman. You can't fight a man like Kittinger, so be sensible."

Webbe was angry. "Then you're going to let Luke make a circus out of this, too?"

"That ain't exactly kind. I'm doing what I can."

Webbe relented. "I know you are, Dig. Sorry."

"Just mind what I said, that's all."

Webbe hung up. He was sweating. He saw that the overcast above the Chesapeake was thicker now, and it was going to rain. Turning from the window, he shrugged into his coat and went out through Merl Gannon's office. Merl was just putting down the telephone.

"David? Mrs. Kittinger just called again."

"Forget it," Webbe said roughly. Then he paused. "No, wait. If she calls again, say I'll be out there some time this afternoon. I want a few words with Luke."

Gannon touched his prim little bow tie. "I don't think you should be the one to see him. As a matter of fact, I planned to talk to Kittinger myself today — among some other things. First I'm going up to Ogulee —"

"What for?" Webbe interrupted.

"David, you've been away. You and Rory are like sons to me, but I know

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your brother better than you do. I think I can find something to help him. I'll get to Kittinger's late; probably before dinner, though. I think I might persuade him not to indulge in a circulation war here in Prince John and perhaps to drop his persecution of Rory."

"But it's my headache," Webbe objected. "I don't know what you have up your sleeve, Merl, but let me talk to Luke."

"I've already arranged to get out there some time this evening." Gannon's smile was shy as he reached for his gray hat. "I must call Lucy. I don't think she's missed knowing where I've been at any moment since we were married. And don't worry about me, David. I'm not afraid of Kittinger. If I fail, then we'll decide what next to do."

Webbe watched him leave and wondered why he felt so worried.

His car was in the lot behind the newspaper building, and he walked toward it with a stubborn stride. Cal Trotter was standing beside the blue convertible when he reached it. Webbe hadn't seen Trotter since he had left Kittinger's organization, and he ignored the man's offered hand. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a friendly mission, Webbe. Take it easy."

"Tell Luke I'll see him when I'm ready, not before," Webbe said. "I don't work for him any more. I don't have to jump like a trained seal every time he cracks the whip."

Trotter grinned. He was a big man with pale yellow hair cropped very short. He wore a checked sport jacket and flannel slacks and handsome London shoes. He looked expensive, and the size of the salary Luke Kittinger paid him was unknown. Nobody knew exactly what his job was, either, Webbe reflected. He was Luke's faithful shadow, the man of all work, piloting Kittinger's private plane, moving through the syndicate's organization like a grim, frozen shadow. He took abuse from Luke that was shocking to those who witnessed it, yet once, when a lunatic got into Kittinger's penthouse with a gun, Cal Trotter had plunged into the path of the bullet to save Kittinger's life. He didn't move aside to let Webbe enter his car.

"Maybe it wasn't Luke who sent me," Trotter said. "Maybe it was Stella. I'm just the hired help, and now I take orders from Luke's wife, too. Stella wants to see you. It's none of my business how you two feel about each other, and in case you're worried about whether I made a report on how you and Stella used to be so cozy, you can forget it. I made a report, all right — you know how Luke is, how he likes a dossier on everybody working for him, and on all the dames he thinks of marrying. But this one I kind of kept to myself."

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"Luke would fire you if he knew that," Webbe said.

"But he doesn't know. And he won't ever know unless you tell him yourself, and I don't figure you're anxious to ruin things for Stella by doing that. I guess you've still got a case for Stella, Webbe, so I'll give you a friendly word of advice. Stay away from her. She sent me to tell you that if you don't come to see her, she'll be over here to see you. Tonight. She usually gets what she wants, but you can have it either way. If you're smart, you won't pay any attention to my message. You'll stay away from her."

"For the last time," Webbe said, "get out of my way." He slid into the car as Cal Trotter stood aside, and drove away, not trusting his anger further. He had known a meeting with Stella was inevitable, but he wished this had happened at any other time but now, when he had so much else to think about. There was no point in spending his anger on Cal Trotter.

A dark green sedan with New York license plates pulled away from the curb as he left the parking lot. Two men were in the other car. Webbe wasn't fully aware of them until he was beyond Prince John's business center, heading north on the coastal highway. Then, when he deliberately circled a suburban block, the other car still followed. They were tailing him so openly that it seemed as if they didn't care whether he knew it or not. He took a secondary road then, halted at a hamburger stand for a brief lunch, and doubled back. The green sedan stuck to him like a persistent fly.

Joel Newcomb's barn was about two miles off the main highway, on a sandy lane that twisted through cedars and pine to the river shore. Thunder grumbled far out over the Chesapeake as Webbe drove down the rough road. There was a still heat, a sense of waiting in the air, as he parked behind the big gray barn and got out. Among the other cars nearby he recognized those of the leading members of the Prince John Commercial Club. Half the major advertisers in the *Call* were here.

He had been here twice before, and it was a curious scene. It was not a barn at all, but an arena. Cigarette smoke was thick in the air, shredded by movement and the murmur of voices. There was a twenty-foot ring in the center of the big room, with a low board rail around it and a double row of seats beyond that. Almost all of the seats were occupied. A dead gamecock lay in the center of the pit. One of the setters-to was walking off with the victor of the last main, a bloody Dominique rooster. The steel spur heeled to its foot glistened with liquid red.

Webbe walked around the ring, nodding to the businessmen and oyster fishermen who spoke to him. His gray eyes swept the surrounding seats and discovered Gort Messinger on the far side of the barn, surrounded by other members of the Commercial Club. He was halfway there when Big Mary stopped him.

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"Webbe, can I see you a minute?"

Webbe halted. "I was going to drop around some time to talk to you, Mary."

"About Rory?"

"And your sister Opal. Maybe you can tell me about them."

The big girl wore a man's soft white shirt and pale denim slacks that fitted too snugly over her competent hips. Her face was badly sunburned from the hours she spent in her oyster boat on the bay. Webbe had heard the salacious snickers up and down the Shore to the effect that Big Mary ran an entirely different business every night when she tied up at her Ogulee Creek landing, but he liked the big blonde girl.

"Why bother me about Opal and Rory?" she asked.

"Because you know she's with him. Where are they now?"

"I wouldn't know or care," she said tightly. "Anyway, this is no place to talk. Drop around my boat sometime soon, Webbe."

"Tonight?"

She grinned. "Whenever you like."

She turned away to collect a bet from an oysterman nearby, and Webbe worked around the arena to Gort Messinger. In five minutes, he knew his trip was wasted. Gort was adamant about withdrawing his advertisements from the *Call*. His mind was on the cockpit.

Webbe turned and pushed his way quietly out of the barn.

## CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS BEGINNING to rain. Webbe put up the black canvas top, then backed into the rutted sand lane that led to the highway two miles away. The rain came down harder and he started the windshield wipers.

When he saw the green sedan that blocked the sand road ahead, it came as a surprise. He had almost forgotten about the other car. Another wooden bridge crossed a rain-dappled creek ahead, and the sedan was parked sidewise on the opposite bank. Webbe halted as his wheels rumbled onto the wet planks. The two men in the other car got out leisurely. The rain pattered softly and the creek murmured under the bridge as Webbe walked forward, his shoulders swinging free, an impatience in him.

"You fellows have been following me long enough. What are you after?" he demanded.

"Maybe it's just you, Webbe. We been waiting for you to show."

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Webbe was suddenly aware of the empty wilderness around him. The two men had chosen their spot midway between the barn and the highway, and there wasn't another house within a mile. He felt his palms grow slippery with sweat, and quite suddenly he knew what was coming.

"What's this all about?"

"You're going to answer some questions, Webbe."

"About what?"

"About a friend of ours, maybe. A guy we're looking for. Your brother, in fact." The taller man looked at his grinning companion. "All right, take him. But don't mark him up too much."

They both came forward across the narrow bridge, their intentions plain. Webbe felt a sudden hammering of his pulse. He moved back a step and his arm grazed the wooden railing and from the tail of his eye he saw the quick flow of muddy water in the creek, a pattern of rain on its surface. Then both men plunged toward him.

He ducked the first blow, but the second man hit the side of his head and drove him to his knees. A heavy shoe came for his ribs and he flung himself aside, toward the rail, then lunged up and slammed his shoulder into the first man's stomach. The other fell back with a yelp of pain. Webbe scrambled into a crouch and threw a left at the other man and used the bridge rail for leverage as he hurtled into him. Something clattered on the bridge planks as his shoulder jarred his opponent. It was a gun. Webbe kicked it off the bridge into the water and then felt a burst of pain above his ear and went down, his thoughts suddenly hazy, his reflexes slowed. Fear touched him for the first time. He tried to get up and the second man kicked him again. He tried to roll toward the bridge rail, and as the other came confidently forward he kicked back at the man's kneecap and was rewarded with a screech of pain. The bridge rail bit sharply into the small of his back as he lurched to his feet.

Webbe stared at them, breathing hard. "All right," he gasped. "What about Rory?"

"You had enough?" the taller man asked. "We figure this might show you that we mean business when we ask questions."

Webbe felt his bleeding mouth. "You've made your point," he said. "Get on with it."

"Then tell us where your brother is hiding out."

"I don't know," Webbe said. "You fellows aren't cops. If the *Journal* hired you two as goons to start trouble —"

"No."

Webbe stared at them. "Then who sent you after me?"

"You forget something, pal. I'm asking the questions. We know you saw

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Rory Webbe last night. All you've got to do is tell us where he's holed up, and we forget this thing. And you forget about us. You're supposed to be a smart boy, so act smart, eh?"

"To hell with you," said Webbe.

He was ready for them this time. He knew they could kill him and get away with it, with nobody the wiser. He couldn't tell them what they wanted to know, and if he could, he'd still have refused. He leaned forward as if exhausted, then suddenly straightened and drove hard at the shorter man, swung under the other's looping blow, caught the first man's arm and levered it over his shoulder and spilled him into the creek. The first man bounced off the bridge piling and pulled a gun, and Webbe slashed at it, missed, saw it come up, saw the sudden flat expression of death in his face, and plunged forward through the stream. The gun made a wild, echoing blast under the hollow of the bridge. The bullet went wide. Then he was out from under the bridge, climbing the bank. The gun roared again and the bullet kicked mud two inches from Webbe's clawing hand. He threw himself over the crest of the embankment desperately, then raced for his car. The taller man showed up on the opposite side of the bridge and he changed course. In a matter of seconds he plunged into the underbrush and ran in a straight line, toward the highway. He heard the yells of his pursuers, and then he paused to suck air into his straining lungs and gather his wits.

He walked for ten minutes, pausing now and then to make sure he wasn't followed. The rain came down harder. Frogs sang in the swamps he passed. He caught the brilliant flash of a cardinal in the pines, and then he heard the sound of cars nearby and suddenly came out on the highway.

A little diner stood about a hundred yards down the opposite side of the road. Webbe plodded heavily toward it.

A car was parked nearby, a black sedan with New York tags that looked familiar. Webbe hesitated, knowing what he must look like with his torn clothes and bloody face. He thought the car was empty. But he looked inside before heading for the diner entrance and saw the man sprawled on the back seat, blissfully asleep. It was Henry Paul Plumm, the star feature writer for the Kittinger newspapers.

A heavy, persistent odor of spilled liquor and illness filled the big car. Plumm's head lolled loosely on the gray cushions. His flaccid cheeks had an unhealthy shine in the rainy afternoon gloom. He sprawled with limbs awry, his wispy hair like straw on his bald freckled scalp. The clinging odors twisted in Webbe's stomach and he withdrew as a girl came out of the diner carrying a paper container of coffee.

She started as she recognized him. "David Webbe!"

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It was painful to grin. "Hi, Hilda."

"What happened to you? Where did you come from?"

He waved toward the pine brush. "It's a long story and not too interesting for you, I'm sure. What's with Henry Paul?"

She continued to regard him with concern. Hilda Brewster was Plumm's secretary. About twenty-five, she had a slim long-legged thoroughbred look, and Webbe recalled how he had been drawn to her at first until Stella distracted him. She had dark coppery hair and large gray, intelligent eyes that considered him with surprise.

"David, you look awful."

"I feel awful," he said, grinning in spite of the bruises. "It's good to see you again, Hilda. Tell me what's with Henry Paul."

"The usual. He's drunk. I didn't know he had the bottle with him. We've been driving since ten this morning — an urgent summons from Luke. I gather we're only a few miles from his estate here. But I can't drive Henry Paul up to Luke's house in this condition. I've been trying to sober him up."

"Let me try," said Webbe. "I'm an old hand at it."

"You look as if you could stand some attention yourself," Hilda insisted. "What happened to you?"

"I'm all right." He leaned into the car. "Henry!"

He slapped Plumm's face. Plumm moaned and pulled away, but he didn't open his eyes. Webbe slapped him again. Plumm's breath made a bubbling noise between his slack lips.

Webbe backed out of the car, suddenly feeling a reaction to what he had just been through, and Hilda said, "You'd better have this coffee yourself, David."

"Thanks." His hands shook as he took the container. "I gather you're still playing nursemaid to Henry Paul, then."

"I can't leave him," she said simply. "He hasn't another soul in the world to help him. Since you pulled out, he's gone steadily downhill. It's his damned conscience. You know how he insists on freedom for his column, and you know how Luke applies pressure in devious ways. Henry Paul keeps telling me how lucky you are to be young enough to make a change. He's missed you terribly, David."

The coffee tasted of chicory, but it was hot.

"What about you, Hilda?" he asked. "Have you missed me?"

She flushed faintly. "That's not fair."

"No, I guess it isn't." He crumpled the coffee container and threw it away. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

He turned away from the red-haired girl and went into the diner,

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ignored the counterman's startled appraisal of his torn clothes, and turned to the coin phone on the wall. Webbe called Dig Trury at the courthouse and told the sheriff about the two hoodlums and their attack on him.

"What I'd like," Webbe said, "is for one of your deputies to pick up my car on Newcomb's Lane and leave it at my house, Dig. I'm tied up with something else right now. Is it too much bother?"

"Not at all. I'll see if we can pick them up. And we'll take care of your car."

Webbe said thanks and hung up. He let the screened door bang as he quit the diner and returned to Plumm's car. "Get in," he said to Hilda. "We'll get Henry Paul sober at my house."

Webbe's bungalow was the place his parents had used long ago for their summers on the Chesapeake, and where Rory had been living alone for all the years Webbe had been in New York. There was a small strip of sandy beach and a gray, weathered dock where he tied up his sloop. Webbe helped Plumm inside, dropped him on a couch, and watched Hilda as she surveyed the rustic furnishings and the fireplace with pleased eyes.

"So this is what you always talked about up in New York," she murmured. "I like it."

For the next half hour they walked Henry Paul up and down and fed him hot black coffee. Webbe began to feel exhausted long before Plumm was sober. When at last he felt it was safe to leave him, Webbe went into his bedroom, stripped off his wet and torn clothes, and showered. The pounding water eased the ache out of him and relaxed the tight knots in his nerves. There was still some ...finess at the corner of his mouth and he had a painful bruise above one ear, but otherwise he was all right. He wrapped an old gray flannel robe around him and padded barefooted into the bright kitchen that overlooked the beach. Hilda was making a fresh pot of coffee. It was only three in the afternoon and the rain had stopped. The girl looked fresh and trim and lovely. She had taken off her raincoat and he saw that she wore a gray jersey dress.

"It's good of you to help with Henry Paul like this," she said.

"I owe Henry a lot. He taught me to be an honest newspaperman."

She looked away. "Even if he isn't one himself, is that it?"

Webbe felt irritated. Hilda's loyalty was too full of compassion over things that went beyond her job. He was glad to see her, but she awakened memories he preferred to keep buried. He watched the way her sober eyes questioned him. "David, are you happy here?"

"Certainly. This is where I want to be."

"Near Stella?" she asked quietly.

"Look, I know you never approved of the way I felt about Stella, but

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that was before she married Luke Kittinger. So she jilted me. But I've gotten over it."

"Have you seen Stella yet?"

"No, but I'm going to Three Fingers to see Luke, on a matter of business. If I see Stella, I can't help that."

"You'll get hurt, David," she said.

"Why do you say that?"

"I'll let Henry Paul tell you. Now is as good a time as any to teach you the facts of newspaper life, I suppose."

Turning, Hilda went back into the living room and Webbe followed silently. Plumm was sitting up in an easy chair. He rubbed his face shakily as Webbe came in, and ran his tongue over his slack mouth. His color was bad, but under his sandy brows his eyes were clear and cynical. He finished his coffee and grinned at Webbe. "Lo, the little warrior."

"How are you feeling?" Webbe asked.

"Oh, I'm all right. I'm one with the masses, now. I'm Luke Kittinger's mouthpiece. I have the public ear, and everybody wants to use my megaphone to shout into it. I don't have any opinions any more, David. I just echo the slimy thoughts Luke dreams up in his swampy mind."

"It didn't use to be that way," Webbe said.

"But it is now, because I'm a flop. I drink because I can't take Luke's pressure, and when I drink he has me where it hurts. I envy you. You don't have any other riders on your horse. Not yet, anyway."

"What does that mean?"

Plumm spoke quietly: "I'm sorry, but I thought I ought to tip you off. Kittinger wants the *Call*. He wants it because he must run everything, wherever he happens to be. And he wants you back at work for him. You're a promising young syndicate man, a Pulitzer Prize winner. He thinks he can break you and train you to the kind of journalism he likes."

"I won't work for him again," Webbe said heavily.

"David against Goliath," Plumm said quietly. "And the days of miracles are over. Don't think I'm drunk. I'm quite sober, when I say your big hope is that your brother Rory kills Luke Kittinger. And if Rory doesn't do it, maybe I will."

"You *are* drunk," Webbe said harshly. "Or a fool."

"A fool yes. And a coward, or I'd have gotten up off my belly and walked like a man long ago."

"Henry, please," Hilda said.

"I'm sorry, my dear. We had better go." Plumm wavered to his feet and looked at Webbe. "Don't do anything rash. Perhaps in a day or two I'll find some stones for your slingshot, David."

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## CHAPTER FOUR

PLUMM LOOKED SEEDY and defeated when he left with Hilda. When they were gone, Webbe called his office. Merl Gannon hadn't returned yet, and he hung up conscious of a restless energy in him. He wanted to strike out at the web around him, but he didn't know who or what to attack first.

At four o'clock a deputy sheriff arrived with Webbe's car. The deputy waved and got into the prowl car that had followed him, Webbe shouted his thanks and went back into the house to change his clothes. The suit he had worn earlier was completely ruined, and he tossed it aside and dressed again from the skin out. It wasn't until he was rummaging for fresh socks that he noticed his gun was missing.

It was a Browning .38, a souvenir of the war, and he usually kept it in the top drawer of the dresser with his linen. He wouldn't have noticed its absence if the holster had been taken, too. But the leather case lay empty and flat among his tumbled clothes, and Webbe suddenly thought of Henry Paul Plumm and his tormented words. He pushed everything else aside in a quick, worried search throughout the house for the weapon. It wasn't there. Someone had gone through the house quickly and efficiently, he saw now, and he knew Plumm wouldn't have had such a chance to make such a search unobserved. It had to be Rory.

Webbe drew a deep, troubled breath. Rory had had a gun when he broke out of the county jail, the one he'd shot Oliver with; but he lost it when he ran away from the cannery. Rory didn't have a gun when Webbe saw him last night. But if he was going after Luke Kittinger, he'd want a gun; and he had come right here for it this morning. Webbe suddenly threw the empty gun holster aside and went out.

Merl Gannon's big Victorian house was on the edge of town, with wide green lawns flowing gently to the banks of the Prince John River. A shell driveway led through a gate in the red brick wall and curved under an old-fashioned porte-cochere. Webbe crossed to the wide front veranda that faced the river and found Lucy Gannon there, attending to her potted begonias. She was a trim woman with quick habits of movement. When she saw him she put aside her watering can, but she didn't smile.

"David?" she asked quickly. "Is anything wrong?"

"Of course not," he said, and kissed her cheek. Her skin smelled like that of a freshly talcumed baby. "Has Merl come home yet?"



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"No, and it rather troubles me." The note of helplessness was unusual for her. Facing him, she said: "Just what exactly is happening, David?"

"Why? Has something turned up to —"

"No, it's nothing, really. It's probably silly, of course, but the thing is that I just don't know where to find Merl."

"He went to see Kittinger. Didn't he phone about it?"

"He told me when he stopped for lunch," Lucy Gannon said. "But now I don't know where he is, and he's never failed to let me know before. Do you think I'm being silly about it, David?"

"I wouldn't worry. Merl should be here soon."

"He should have been back now. He said he'd take me to the Woman's Club." She paused uncertainly. "Merl was very upset when he left. On several counts. He was going to Ogulee, he said, to run down a rumor about Rory and — and Mrs. Kittinger. He told me about the *Journal*, and how the businessmen have been bribed by lower rates to withdraw their advertising. He was really very angry about it and said he'd have a showdown with Mr. Kittinger." Something moved dimly behind her eyes. "David, he never got to Kittinger's."

Webbe was startled. "Are you sure?"

"I just called Mr. Kittinger myself. He was almost rude. He said Merl was not there and there was nothing to discuss."

Lucy Gannon went on: "I can't help worrying. If you knew about Merl and me, you'd see how unusual this is. He never fails to call me, ever since I had that silly little heart attack, years ago." She smiled faintly. "He doesn't think I know why he does it, but he always makes sure I know where to reach him. But he hasn't called since he left for Ogulee, and apparently he hasn't seen Mr. Kittinger." Her voice was muffled. "I think something has happened, David. Something terrible."

A long curving road ran like a thread over the mile-wide inlet to Three Fingers Island. Kittinger owned the whole island, about three miles long, and although there were other houses there, none were occupied except Kittinger's. Once over the causeway, the road twisted through groves of beech and oak and halted at a barway where a sign warned that the field ahead was used for private planes. Webbe opened the gate and drove across the field in the gathering dusk. A barn at the far end had been converted into a hangar, but the doors were closed and no one was in sight.

Nobody greeted him as he stepped onto the stately porch, and when no one answered his ring he went through the screened doorway into the shining blue and white of a central hall. Radio music tinkled like a waterfall down the spiraled stairs ahead. Webbe waited, then went back and rang again.

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After another moment, he turned to the airy staircase and went up, following the sound of the music.

The radio led him to a small bedroom in the extreme right wing, apparently serving as quarters for the help. Webbe paused in the doorway. A small bald man with horn-rimmed glasses sat up in bed, listening to the radio, a pleased smile on his thin mouth. Webbe stepped quickly inside and closed the door. The bald man stared in surprise.

"Hello! What's going on?"

"Turn up the radio a bit," Webbe said.

"What for? I don't understand —"

"Turn it up, Oliver," Webbe repeated.

Oliver made the music louder. "Have I seen you here before?"

"Not here," Webbe said. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. Of course, this specialist Mr. Kittinger got down from New York talks a funny jargon, but I feel fine. I don't mind staying here a bit. Are you a doctor, too?"

"No," Webbe said. "How much is Kittinger paying you to hide here and pretend to be seriously wounded, Oliver?"

"Hey, I didn't say anything about that. I'm not supposed to tell about it. I thought only Mr. Kittinger and me knew about this arrangement. Are you a friend of Kittinger's?"

"No. I'm David Webbe. From the *Call*."

The little man's face closed in a spasm of fear. "Get out!" he said quickly. "Get out of here!"

"Not until you answer some questions, Oliver."

Oliver's eyes looked enormous behind his horn-rimmed glasses. His mouth trembled. "I haven't done anything wrong. Maybe Rory didn't mean to shoot me — I mean, we were scuffling for the gun, and all —"

"I'm afraid you let Kittinger talk you into something that may spell lot of trouble for you, Oliver."

"I don't want any trouble. And I don't want any stories about me in your newspaper, either."

"You don't have a choice, now that I've seen you," Webbe told him. "Unless you're out of here by tonight, the *Call* will print the true story about you in tomorrow's paper."

"It's up to you."

A door slammed downstairs and he stiffened, thinking suddenly of Cal Trotter. Then a voice called up the distant stairway.

"Dave? Dave, is that you?"

It was Stella Kittinger. Webbe looked back at the bald man in the bed. "Don't forget, Oliver. Get out of here tonight."

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Oliver nodded in mute distress, and he went downstairs. Stella met him in the central hallway, smiling, her hands outstretched for his. It was a difficult moment. Her handclasp was cool and light, and he was struck again by her silver-blonde hair, pulled severely back from the oval of her face. He had thought she might look different, but she was lovelier than ever. Her brown eyes were like fine amber, and he felt his breath catch in spite of himself. She wore a white skirt and a dark green silk blouse that set off the golden color of her skin.

"I saw your car outside and almost didn't believe it. How good it is to see you!"

"I came to see Luke. Understand that, Stella."

"Of course I understand. More than you suppose. Come in here, where we can talk."

Her cool hands drew him into an oval library. A brick fireplace was set into one curving wall of the blue and ivory room. Several decanters of liquor stood on a leather-topped coffee table, and Webbe wondered briefly where Plumm and Hilda Brewster might be. He had no way of knowing if his face was composed, but he was relieved by the quiet firmness in his own voice.

"You look wonderful, Stella. It's been a long time."

"More than a year. Did you miss me?"

"Of course," he said. "In Korea."

She turned away. Her pale hair was cut in a Dutch bob, framing her face. She had been Luke's secretary in the days when Webbe still thought they might be married. He saw the same proud, arrogant tilt to her neatly shaped head, the same independence in her clear amber eyes. She was a girl of strong will and purpose. She got what she wanted. She was Mrs. Luke Kittinger, secure in her niche in the upper echelons of society. The fact that she was the fourth of a series of wives with whom Luke had made scandalous headlines meant nothing to her. She had used her natural talents — a cool, calculating intelligence and a face and figure that attracted universal attention — to win her goal. Webbe remembered the nights in her little apartment when she was just Stella Smith and he found it difficult to believe that any of it had been true.

"Darling," she smiled, "I don't feel too sensible myself. Come, we'll have a drink to the future. You have a great one, you know."

"Have I?"

"Luke wants a talk with you. You're in for a surprise."

"I doubt if it will be pleasant. I just want to ask him about my partner, Merl Gannon. Was he here this afternoon?"

She shook her head. "Trotter gave the servants their day off and I've just come back from town, myself. You'll have to ask Luke."

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They drank with their eyes on each other, oddly solemn and silent.

"Stella, why did you do it?" he asked abruptly.

"You know why I married Luke. We discussed it often enough."

"I never thought you were serious. I thought you loved me."

"This had nothing to do with love," she said quietly.

"Aren't you satisfied with Luke? Or what you did to Rory?"

"Please," she whispered. "I made a mistake. I thought I was tough enough to take anything, but I've since found out about Luke's first three wives. I won't even tell you about it, David. But it's more than I could stomach. Rory was just — well, he offered a moment's escape." Stella shivered delicately. "That was a mistake, too. I didn't want to compete with that swamp girl of Rory's. I don't want anyone to hate me the way Opal hates me." She drew a deep breath. "I've asked Luke for a divorce, you know. But now he regards me as a challenge, and he'll never let me go."

"Has it been that bad, Stella?"

"Worse than you can imagine. I hate him. I was so wrong about everything! I wanted everything in the world, and I thought no price was too high to pay for it. I thought Luke could give me what I wanted, but all I ever really desired was you. If I could have you, and all this, too —"

She trembled. He wanted to push her away, but he couldn't. Too much of her was still a part of him. When her mouth found his, her kiss was searching and violent and he no longer thought of anything at all except that he held her again, at last.

"I belong to you," she whispered. "I made a mistake and it's up to me to correct it, somehow. I know how I've hurt you, darling, and some day I'll make it up to you. Very soon."

He took her arms from around his shoulders, and for a moment she still clung to him. He said: "I've got to see Luke. Right now."

She was alarmed. "You won't say anything foolish —"

"It's business. That's what I came for."

She said quickly, "Of course. This isn't the time to talk things out. I'll see you tomorrow, when we can be alone as we used to be."

"No," Webbe said. "It's over with."

"I don't believe that. Give me a chance, darling. There's so much I want to tell you —" She paused suddenly and her slanted eyes went wide, strange and secretive and luminous.

"Stella, what is it?"

"Darling, the door," she said. "The door is open."

He turned to look, feeling stupid. Cal Trotter stood there, motionless, his hard, handsome face an oddly heavy mask that told Webbe nothing. *The watchdog*, he thought.

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Trotter dragged at a cigarette and turned his narrow head as Webbe approached. For a moment Webbe hated this ubiquitous shadow of Luke Kittinger, this man without a soul. Trotter dropped his cigarette to the marble floor and stepped on it deliberately, his thick crepe rubber soles squeaking slightly. His voice was quiet.

"I warned you, you son of a bitch," he said.

"Take it easy," Webbe said. "I came to see Luke."

"And went right for his wife, you —"

His word was vile, triggering a frustrated explosion in Webbe. He hit the man with all the anger in him, and Trotter crashed back against the ornate pilaster framing the door. Blood trickled from his split lip. He didn't get up. He slid backward a bit on the marble floor, and his hand came out of his pocket with a short, snubby-barreled revolver. He pointed the gun at Webbe.

"Maybe this is the best way to settle it," Trotter said.

Webbe jumped for the gun, and at the same moment he heard a faint, shrill scream from the far end of the house. Trotter heard it, too, and lowered the weapon as Webbe checked himself. The scream was followed by a man's cry of pain and terror, and then a thumping noise.

Turning, Webbe ran through the house toward the sounds.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE NORTH WING of the house was a series of extensions added to the building since colonial times. Webbe halted at the big kitchen. From behind him came Trotter's voice, talking quickly to Stella. Trotter sounded angry, almost abusive. Light glowed at the end of a short hallway ahead and Webbe went on into a small ell and paused in the doorway to a small sitting room. Kittinger, Hilda, and Henry Plumm were in the room. Plumm sprawled in a chair behind a small kidney-shaped desk supporting a portable typewriter and a green gooseneck lamp. The floor was strewn with sheets of yellow copy paper. He had been drinking again. His wispy hair was dishevelled and his face was flushed except where white fingermarks stood out against his mottled red skin.

Hilda Brewster sat on a small couch against the opposite wall, her face reflecting revulsion and dismay as Luke Kittinger bulked over the drunken man.

Kittinger's voice trembled with rage. "I told you what would happen if

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you got smart, Plumm. I gave you the line on this story and you deliberately wrote a column distorting my facts."

"I only wrote the truth about it," Henry Paul mumbled.

"The truth is what I say it is!" the big man shouted. "Don't ever forget that. You're not playing an intellectual parlor game when you work for me. You write what I say and think what I think. Is that clear?"

Kittinger slapped him, snapping Plumm's head back. Before Webbe could jump to interfere, Kittinger hit him again and Plumm was knocked to the floor. His nose was bleeding and there was a deep cut in his cheek. Kittinger was a bull of a man in his late forties, possessed by a rage that passed the edge of reason. As Plumm sprawled on the floor, Kittinger kicked him. Hilda screamed and started up from the couch, but by then Webbe had slammed into Luke, driving him off balance. Kittinger thudded against the wall and twisted in astonishment, his pale eyes queerly vacant. Plumm scrambled crabwise to one side on the floor. Webbe ducked as Luke swung at him, then tried to pin his flailing arms to his sides.

"Hold it!" he yelled.

"Webbe?" Kittinger said thickly.

"Take it easy," Webbe gasped.

Above the sudden drumming of feet approaching from the other part of the house came a queer stifled noise of animal pain and humiliation. Henry Paul Plumm was crying.

"That was a rotten thing to do, Luke," he said.

"He was drunk."

"And helpless," said Webbe.

"He deserved it. He wrote something I expressly forbade him to consider and thought he could send it out on the syndicate wires before I learned about it."

"What was it about? My brother Rory, and Oliver?"

Kittinger regarded him carefully. "You keep out of that, too."

"I can't," Webbe said. "I'll help Rory all I can, and I've already seen Oliver. The true story about Oliver gets printed tomorrow."

Kittinger started forward, then checked himself as Trotter burst into the room. Stella was not with him. Trotter looked chagrined. He started for Webbe, and Kittinger said sharply: "Never mind, Cal."

"Are you all right, Luke?"

"Who told you to let the servants go this afternoon?"

"It's Thursday," Trotter said. "It's the usual thing."

"I told you I wanted everybody on hand until Rory Webbe is rounded up, didn't I? Don't make any excuses. Get out."

Trotter looked at Plumm and Hilda, his mouth twisted in a little grin,

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and then he went out quietly. Kittinger turned to Webbe. "You and I are going to have a little talk. Come along."

Webbe followed Kittinger back into the blue and gold oval library where he had seen Stella. She wasn't here. Kittinger stood with his back to the fireplace, his face heavy and coarse as he studied Webbe. Luke Kittinger personified wealth and power. He had been born to the luxury of Palm Beach and Bermuda, polo and racing cars, inheriting a world in which he had the right to hire and fire a thousand people at his whim. Yet he was surprisingly acute with the newspaper syndicate, hard and ruthless and detested for his cheap journalism and his personal life as well.

Kittinger's first wife had won a divorce in two months and immediately sank into obscurity. The second ended in a mental institution. The third wife was dead, a young debutante who killed herself by jumping from the terrace of Luke's penthouse just as the day shift was leaving the building. It happened just over a year ago.

Only six months later, Luke married Stella Smith. . . .

Webbe looked at Kittinger now, abruptly brought back to the present. Kittinger waved him to a chair. "Sit down, Webbe. I'm glad you came. You're smart and clever, and I'm sure you will be reasonable."

"About what?" Webbe asked bluntly. "I only came because my partner has disappeared. He was supposed to see you today."

"Oh. His wife called me about that," Kittinger said, nodding. "I haven't seen him, and he wasn't here that I know of. In any case, I'll only deal with you, Webbe. I'm prepared to be generous, because I know you wrote most of the material for Plumm, and I'm ready to offer you the whole column, in your name, for five hundred a week."

"I'm not for sale," Webbe told him.

Kittinger's head came forward on his massive shoulders. "I didn't think you were a fool. Perhaps I've been mistaken. I can ruin you, don't you know that? Did your partner come here thinking he could simply talk me out of the *Journal?* I'll wipe out the *Call*, Webbe. I'll give away advertising for nothing, if I have to, but I'll wipe you out!"

Webbe spoke quietly. "Thanks for the warning, Luke."

"I can use you, Webbe. I'm not afraid to have you back with me. Not even worried about this thing with your brother. I'll help you with Rory, if you insist. And I know all about you and Stella, but I can handle that and —" Kittinger paused, grinning. "Does that surprise you — that I know how you feel about my wife?"

"A little," Webbe admitted.

"Stella and I are two of a kind. If you don't know that yet, then you're a worse fool than you've shown yourself to be, so far."

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Webbe forced down his anger. "You've made things plain, Luke. The answer is still no. So is my partner's. Are you sure he wasn't here this afternoon?"

Kittinger made an impatient gesture. "I haven't seen him and I don't want to. There's one more thing, however, that may change your mind. I'm serious when I offer to help your brother Rory. I admit I was hard on him when I heard he was seeing Stella, but I know now it was her fault, not his. I bear no grudges. I'll get the police to ease up on him — even help his trial. If you know where he is, you'd better tell me."

"Is that why you sent those two thugs to rough me up this afternoon?" Webbe asked. "To learn where Rory is hiding?"

Kittinger frowned. "What two thugs?"

Webbe had no chance to reply. The sharp explosion of bursting glass came from the window behind him, followed by the flat crack of a gun. Splinters from the window crashed on the floor. Webbe spun toward the sound, then turned to look at Kittinger. Kittinger was staring open-mouthed at the shattered window. In that moment his face sagged with fear, wiped clean of brutality by wild terror. Then he made a small sound in his throat and pitched to the floor.

## CHAPTER SIX

WEBBE PLUNGED ACROSS the room toward the fallen man. Luke's eyes reflected nothing rational. There was a thin razor line of blood along his scalp where the bullet had grazed him, but it was nothing serious. Webbe straightened and stared at the raw gouge in the paneling above the fireplace where the bullet had buried itself. He heard shouting from the back of the house and left Kittinger as he was, frozen with fear, to run for the hallway. Nobody was in sight. He swung right, burst through the screened doorway and across the wide columned veranda for the lawn.

He looked back and saw Stella cross his line of vision through the library window, followed by Hilda Brewster, and he wondered where Plumm was, then moved toward a thick hedge of forsythia from where he judged the shot had been fired.

A sudden muffled groan from behind the hedge made him freeze. Cal Trotter sprawled there, his gun on the grass nearby. Webbe started to pick it up and Trotter suddenly lurched up and put his hand on it before he could reach it. The man's words were blurred and jumbled.

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"Rory — jumped him — he got away —"

"You're sure it was Rory?" Webbe asked.

"Big fellow — wearing denims —" Trotter wavered to his feet, holding the gun. "Got slugged, that's all. Go after him. Get him." As an afterthought, he said: "Is Luke all right?"

"Scared witless," Webbe said grimly. "Just scratched."

In the gloom, he couldn't read the other man's face. He turned away and moved down the graveled path that serpentined across the lawn toward the beach. When he looked back, he saw Trotter stumbling toward the house. It was just as well. He didn't want Trotter with him if Rory was nearby. He wanted to find Rory alone.

The beach was shrouded in the same deep darkness that covered the wide reaches of the bay. Tangled scrub began where the landscaped lawns ended. Webbe paused near the boathouse, then went up a little wooden stairway to a boardwalk that encircled the structure. He listened to the tide lap at the pilings under the boathouse and halted halfway to the far corner of the gallery that jutted over the shallow water.

"Rory?" he called softly.

He heard nothing but the tide and the slow curling of the surf nearby.

He had no chance to avoid Rory's first blow. Webbe yelled and twisted to duck again, but the wooden gallery was too narrow and he crashed against the white railing before he could get completely out of the way. He slipped on the wet boards and went down, glimpsing the gun that slashed at him and missed. But with the speed of a giant cat, Rory whipped an arm around his neck and tightened his grip across his throat. There was a roaring in his ears, and his fingers tore at the big forearm that strangled him. Then he heard Opal's low, intense voice.

"Rory, honey! Stop. We've got to get out of here!"

Webbe began to slip down into thunderous darkness just as Rory's grip suddenly relaxed. His legs were like rubber. He went down to his knees, leaning against the boathouse. Air whistled painfully through his throat as he sucked in his first breath. He looked up and saw Rory's huge outline standing wide-legged above him, and Rory's voice reached down into the dark pit where his consciousness still lingered.

"Davey? Davey, you all right?"

Webbe nodded, rubbing his throat. He heard Opal's husky voice again, urging Rory to hurry. She looked up toward the main house with big, wide eyes. Under her beret, her short-cropped hair was like a boy's, and there was a wild poise to her slim, young body, like that of a woodland creature ready for flight. There was no alarm from the big house on the knoll. Rory's arm was still in the makeshift sling as it had been last night, but fresh blood

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had seeped through the crude bandages. He held Webbe's Browning he had taken from the bungalow, pointed at Webbe's stomach.

Opal said tightly: "What are you going to do with him, honey? Somebody will be here soon."

Webbe tried his voice. It was painful to push words through the ache in his throat. "Give me my gun. Then come with me. Oliver's all right."

"I know he's all right," Rory said.

"Then you'll only make things worse going on with this. It was a fool thing to do, trying to shoot Kittinger just now."

"But I didn't," Rory said thickly. "I never fired that shot. Opal and I were hiding down here, all the time."

"Then who was it?"

Rory didn't reply. His big body was tense as an animal's poised for instant flight. There was still no alarm or organized search from the main house. Webbe flicked a glance at Opal and saw the small leather bag she carried. She hugged it closely as if she would never let it go. Considering that Rory seemed to be on the point of panic, Webbe had the feeling that more had happened here that he didn't understand.

"Rory, I'll help you in every way I can," he said. "But you've got to give yourself up, don't you see?"

"I'm sorry, Davey."

Without warning, he swung hard at Webbe. Webbe was conscious of an instant of utter dismay through the explosion of pain that went through him, and then he broke through the gallery rail with a crash and felt himself fall through space into the dark cold shock of the water below.

The icy surface closed over his head, but he didn't fight it. His knee scraped the shallow bottom and he rolled over, his mind dim and scarcely functioning.

When he regained some of his strength he forced his way toward the glimmering beach beside the boathouse. A spasm of shivering possessed him. He fell flat when he reached the sand, his fingers clawing the wet pebbles. Then he heard footsteps approach on the graveled lawn path, almost running, and he caught the gleam of a flashlight. Out of the darkness he saw Hilda Brewster coming near.

"Webbe? Is that you?"

She paused in front of him. "I heard a shout down here, and Trotter said you were looking for Rory. You —" Her voice broke off as she shone the light on his disheveled figure. "Oh, Lord, what happened to you this time?"

"It's getting to be a habit," Webbe said wryly. He hesitated. "Look, you'd better try to find Plumm." He drew a deep breath and wished he could think more clearly. "I don't think it was Rory who just tried to kill

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Luke. He was scared out of his wits when I caught him here, but I don't know why. Hilda, you've got to help me. Don't speak about this. Don't say anything about Rory to anyone. I know him, and I don't think he did it. It's just the way he behaved now that's puzzling me. Just forget you saw me here, all right?"

She nodded reluctantly. "If you say so."

He stared at the boathouse, then took her flashlight and trained it on the pilings underneath. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but from this vantage point on the beach he could see all the way under the building. Something here, rather than at the main house, had thrown Rory into a panic. There was some rubbish, pieces of old driftwood, some abandoned garden tools. He was about to give up when the light held on something dim and white far up under the planks on the beach side. The breath went out of him in a long sigh.

He understood Rory's panic now. He was sure Rory had discovered it, too, perhaps only a few moments before his arrival. Crammed against the back bulkheads was the body of a man. The flashlight shone on the sightless face turned toward him. Gray hair gleamed silvery in the bright beam. Webbe saw the familiar blue suit, the twisted little bowtie that had always been so dapper, the meticulous row of sharpened yellow pencils in the breast pocket.

And the knife wounds in the throat and chest.

The dead man was Merl Gannon.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

WEBBE AWOKE AT ten o'clock with the feeling he had lived through a nightmare. The new day was hot and clear. He got out of bed slowly, wincing at his bruised stiffness. He felt as if he were still beating the brush with Dig Trury's posse, hunting for Rory from one end of Three Fingers to the other. He felt haunted by the avidity with which Luke Kittinger had joined the hunt, hoping for a kill. They hadn't caught Rory or the girl. Dig Trury had said it all when they gave up at three in the morning. "Rory's like a swamp fox. He's gone into a hole somewhere that only he knows about. The only chance we'll get is when he comes out of that hole, wherever it is. Then we'll grab him."

Luke had been loud and arrogant, and Webb's mouth tightened as he recalled the ugly scene. According to Kittinger, it was clear enough for

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everyone: Gannon had come to Three Fingers to snoop and spy, after having scoured the Ogulee area for Rory. Gannon, excited by some premise or suspicion that was now forever locked away in his dead brain, hadn't approached the house on Three Fingers directly. He had been lying in wait for something — had it been foreknowledge that Rory and Opal would be on the island, too? — and instead of following out his original intention of speaking to Luke, he had avoided the main house and wandered down to the boathouse and stumbled on Rory hiding there, waiting for night to make his attempt on Kittinger's life. In a panic, Rory had beaten the elderly man to death and hastily hid the body. Clear enough. But you don't believe it, Webbe thought. Not of Rory. Not when Merl and Lucy Gannon had been like parents to them since you lost your own folks. But you're the only one who doesn't believe it, he told himself.

He had shaved and was taking his shower when he heard the screen door slam. Webbe hastily dressed in blue gabardine slacks and covered the long living room with quick strides, then checked himself as he saw the lime-green Cadillac parked near the dock. Frowning, he went on to the kitchen, and his voice was harsh as he paused in the doorway.

"What are you doing here?"

Stella Kittinger turned, smiling, and waved a spatula. "I heard your shower and thought of starting your breakfast, darling." She broke several eggs in a skillet. "Don't be angry with me. How do you like these?"

She was beautiful enough to make Webbe's breath catch quickly.

"No kiss for the cook this morning?" she pouted.

"You shouldn't be here," he declared flatly.

"But I couldn't wait any longer to see you."

"Not here," he insisted.

She arched an amused eyebrow. "Afraid, darling?"

"Why did you come here, Stella?"

"To see you, to talk to you, to find out how you are."

"Does Luke know you're here?"

She pouted. "You weren't very clever to quarrel with Luke last night. He's generally right about business things. Have you seen the first edition of the *Journal* this morning? It makes your little newspaper look as dry as an auditor's report." She laughed softly. "Poor David. Go ahead, look at it. There's a copy in my car. Breakfast will be ready in two shakes."

Webbe turned abruptly and went outside. Heat was already building up, even at this hour of the morning.

The *Journal* had come back to life, but it was like a zombie, without a soul of its own. Slowly Webbe scanned the tabloid headlines that screamed for Rory's capture. That was Luke's voice prejudging and calling for

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execution, a voice born of deeply hidden fears under the outward brutality. Webbe was shocked. He crumpled the paper and strode angrily back to the bungalow.

Stella had set the table near the window. Her smile was amused. "Don't take it so hard, darling. Surely you know by now the sort of newspaper Luke revels in publishing."

"It's all wrong," Webbe said thickly.

"I came through town on my way over, and the edition is already sold out. You'll find it's useless to fight Luke this way."

"There is no other way," he said; and then he looked up at her golden figure. "Or is there?"

"It depends," she said. "If you still love me, David."

"That has nothing to do with it." He could read her golden eyes. "Stella, are you sure you didn't see Merl Gannon yesterday?"

"I was in town all that time. I can see this is no time to talk about ourselves. You're too upset about Rory and Merl Gannon. David, do you know the beach house that architect built on the north point of the island, before Luke bought him out?" She waited for his nod. "Meet me there this afternoon. Don't shake your head, please. It's important. I have a lot to tell you, and it may be to your profit to listen."

"All right," he said.

"I love you. I truly do."

Her hands drew his head down to hers. He hadn't wanted to kiss her. But she made him aware of every demanding nuance of her body as she pressed close to him in the embrace. Her mouth was compelling, warm and clinging, and he felt her shiver and found an echo from the past in himself.

Then he heard a small choked sound from the doorway and he forced Stella aside and turned to look. Hilda Brewster stood there. Her eyes were enormous in her white face. The sunlight tangled in her coppery hair and he heard Stella's soft laughter as he said haltingly: "Hilda —"

Without a word, the other girl ran from the house. Webbe started after her, then checked himself in the doorway. Hilda's feet drummed on the plank walk to the driveway, and a moment later her car started with an angry, frustrated sound and roared away. He turned back to Stella, who was gathering up a white sharkskin purse.

"What was the matter with her?"

"Darling, Miss Brewster is a fool. She never approved of me, and what she just saw probably makes her hate me. She's jealous, of course."

"Jealous?"

"Of me, darling." She touched Webbe's face, smiling. "You're so obtuse, David. I must go now. Don't forget — at three o'clock."

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He watched her drive off in the green Cadillac and felt an angry frustration ride in him.

It was only ten in the morning. He telephoned the *Call* first and spoke to Miss Honeyman, who had been Gannon's secretary for twenty years, and gave her instructions for handling the obituary edition of Merl Gannon. Miss Honeyman's troubled voice asked if he had seen the *Journal*. He told her he had, said he would be in before noon, and hung up.

The courthouse was a big graystone affair of the 1880's, facing the park in the center of town. Dig Trury's office had a wall of dusty arched windows where pigeons made their liquid noises on the wide stone ledges. The small fan that was going stirred up the heavy air and only made Webbe more conscious of the heat than before.

"Be with you in a minute, Webbe," Trury said.

The sheriff looked as if he'd had no sleep at all. He wore his usual black string tie with a wide-collared white shirt and black linen coat. Webbe settled in one of the hard oak chairs and looked at the other man in the room. It was Fred Yates, one of the county jail turnkeys. Yates was a plump little man with fat white hands and a saddle nose; perspiration shone on his round face and his eyes slewed quickly, as if he wanted only to escape the sheriff's icy interest. Trury was saying:

"Now look, Fred, get rid of the idea that I'm picking on you. But you're the only man who can help me, and I want some answers. There's something mighty peculiar about the way Rory Webbe got out of jail, and I want to know what happened there."

"There was nothin' funny about it, Dig," said Yates.

"But how did he manage it when he decided to get out?"

"I don't rightly know. He must've got a key somewhere. Maybe that Opal Haines got him one. She always visited." Fred Yates' eyes touched Webbe. "Except for Mr. Webbe here, Rory had no other visitors."

"Are any of your keys missing?" Trury asked.

"No, sir."

"Did you miss any of them for a short time, say, last week?"

"No, Dig. I swear it. I don't know how he got out," Yates said helplessly. "We checked out Mr. Webbe, here, and then all we found was his cell wide open when we made the usual rounds. Gone like a puff of smoke, he was. I want to help every way I can, Dig. I don't like havin' my honesty questioned."

Trury sighed. "All right, Fred. I'll see you again, later."

The fat turnkey quit the office with relief. Trury adjusted the whining electric fan and loosened his gunbelt.

"I didn't give my brother a key. In case that's what you're thinking."

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"I'm only groping," Trury said. "We hunted all night for Rory and the girl, and Kittinger gave me a handful, too, wanting to shoot anything on sight. Only good thing that happened was with Joe Oliver; I guess we got you to thank for that. Joe went home to his wife last night. Says he feels much better." Trury grinned. "It doesn't help Rory much, since the *Journal's* already convicted him of killing Merl Gannon."

"You know Rory would never touch Merl. But there's going to be a lot of pressure on you, Dig."

"It's already started. Senator Holmes called me early this morning. Wants action. Law and order. You know how he is."

"Sure," said Webbe. "Is there anything new on Gannon?"

"Found his car. Run off the end of the causeway, this side of the island, in ten feet of water. I've got a wrecker trying to haul it out, but I don't think we'll learn much from it." Trury sighed. "I know you don't think Rory would kill Merl Gannon, but I make no judgments. Only thing is, if Luke Kittinger ever draws a bead on him, we'll never get the answer." Trury's eyes probed at Webbe. "Don't get mad, Davey, but I got to ask you this. Next to Rory, I reckon you know that island better than anybody in Prince John. You and Rory played there all the time as kids. You got any new ideas where he might be holed up now?"

"No."

"If you thought about it, where would he be, Davey?"

Webbe stood up. "I don't think I'd tell you, Dig. Not the way public sentiment stands now."

Trury was angry. "Nobody would lay a hand on him. You have my word for it."

"I can't take that chance," Webbe said stubbornly.

"Then you do know where Rory is hiding?"

"I think I can find him," Webbe said. "I'm going to try."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

WEBBE was disturbed as he left the sheriff's office, more by what was left unsaid than by the sheriff's actual words. He knew he wasn't in the clear on Rory's escape yet. Nobody followed him, however, as he circled the little park and returned to the *Call* office.

Miss Honeyman met him as he came up the stairs. Merl's secretary had been crying, and her eyes looked red and puffy.

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"Mr. Webbe, I'm so sorry — what are we to do?"

"We'll get out the regular edition of the *Call* today. That's all we can do." Webbe patted her thin shoulders. "Tell the pressmen to hold a four-column box open on the front page. I'll write the editorial."

"Yes, Mr. Webbe." Then, as he started away, she added: "There's a gentleman in your office — he's been writing an editorial, too, he says. He said you worked with him in New York, Mr. Webbe."

"Henry Paul Plumm?"

"Yes, sir. I think he — we'll, he seems a little strange."

"He's probably drunk," Webbe said bluntly.

He pushed open the door and went in through Merl Gannon's connecting office. Henry Paul Plumm sat behind his desk, scowling at the typewriter Webbe kept there. He was alone. An empty bottle of bourbon caught the hot sunlight as it rested on the desk beside the typewriter. Plumm looked as if he hadn't slept last night, too. As Webbe closed the door behind him, Plumm looked up with a twisted grin.

"Lo, our little warrior. Your Goliath is trumpeting his challenge loudly and clearly this miserable morning."

"What are you doing here, Henry?" Webbe asked.

"Perhaps I wanted to see and smell and feel a real news office again. The odor of honesty around here is almost too much to bear. Sitting here, I feel like a captive home from Babylon at last."

"Henry, you've got to stop drinking."

Plumm grinned again. "I needed lubrication for the rusty gears of my conscience. I've been writing an editorial for you. I know you won't use it, because you'll want to handle it yourself, but I just wanted to see what it might be like." Abruptly Plumm's voice changed and he looked away from Webbe toward the hot haze of the Chesapeake beyond the window. He seemed to shrink into himself and then he shook his head and said: "Tell me something, David. About last night. Do you despise me for it? For letting Luke slap me, and crying about it, afterward?"

"No, Henry, I don't despise you."

"It was a bloody godawful thing for you to see."

"Forget it, Henry."

Plumm said: "I can't forget it. I ought to kill him for it."

"Did you try?" Webbe asked.

"What?"

"Did you try to kill Luke last night?"

Plumm said: "Maybe," and pushed up from the chair, his movements deliberate and controlled. Meticulously he placed the empty bourbon bottle in the center of Webbe's clean wastebasket. Then he gathered up

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his sheets of yellow copy paper and tore them across once and then again. He let the pieces flutter toward the basket, but most of the scraps went on the floor. Webbe watched him with pity.

Webbe said: "I've got a lot of things to do today, Henry. All of them are unpleasant, but I'd like to get on with them."

"Like gathering stones for your slingshot, David?"

"Perhaps."

"You needn't bother. I don't think any will be needed."

"Henry, don't talk like a fool."

"Why not?" Plumm asked. "I might kill Luke Kittinger for you, and that would solve your basic problem."

Webbe stared.

Plumm said: "Or maybe somebody else will do it for you."

When Henry Paul was gone, Webbe settled down to work on the obituary edition for Merl Gannon, as well as his front-page editorial condemning the *Journal's* tactics of inflaming public opinion. He worked steadily, not letting his thoughts wander from the immediate task at hand. The telephone rang constantly in the next room and now and then he heard Miss Honeyman's voice as she answered messages of condolence. He told her to continue to take all messages and not interrupt him, and then went back to his copy paper. He never once considered Henry Plumm's torn editorial. This was his job, and he didn't want any help with it.

When he finished, Webbe gathered up his copy and went down to the pressroom with it, and afterward drove home. His bungalow was quiet and deserted when he parked in the shade of the sycamore trees and went inside. He took a long, cold shower, but it provided only temporary relief against the dead heat that pressed over the shore. He thought of some of the things Dig Trury had said, and the more he thought about them, the more certain he became that there was only one thing for him to do.

He fixed his lunch, thinking of Fred Yates, the turnkey, and Rory's escape from jail, and he wished Rory was still safe there. He'd have been far better off if he hadn't broken out. Remembering Rory's injured arm, he knew he would need a doctor today, too. All the time he considered this he knew he really had no choice, because he was remembering lazy summer afternoons, hot as this one was hot, when he and Rory took the dinghy and rowed down to Three Fingers for the place where they always went swimming, buck naked. He went outside to the dock and his little sloop.

The auxiliary motor pushed the fat little sailboat sluggishly across the glassy water.

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Webbe watched the shore, and when the narrow channel suddenly opened before him he moved the tiller and the sloop glided into the cove. Just before it lost its forward motion he let the bow scrape easily into the soft sand of a small beach on the north side of the cove, and then he jumped out and chunked the anchor into the sand and stood still, absorbing the silence and the heat and the close, shadowed secrecy of the place. The boat was screened on two sides by the thick tracery of oaks and stunted maples that grew close to the water's edge, and from the air, as well. Webbe moved forward through the brush about twenty feet from the water's edge, circling the little cove. When he was about level with the deepest indentation of the cove, he looked for the old house, where he remembered it to be.

It looked shabbier and much smaller, of course, its warped shingles weathered by the Chesapeake's winter storms. It stood close to the water's edge in a thick tangle of brush, and as he stood defining the outline of the house through the almost perfect camouflage of trees and undergrowth, Webbe heard a sudden splash in the water, followed by a woman's low call and then a giggle. The splash he had heard was a swimmer diving off the slanting veranda that jutted out over the water. He remembered the times he and Rory had come here just for that, alone in this secret place all their own, and then he pushed the past out of his mind and searched for the swimming woman. He felt a strange inevitability about all this that had been with him for some time now, and he stood quietly in the brush beside the tiny brook, watching the nude girl as she swam in the cove.

It was Opal.

She swam with long, easy strokes, her body tanned and lushly curved, occasionally flashing in the streaks of light and shadow on the quiet water, and now and then she dived and when she came up she laughed and shook her short, boyish yellow hair.

"Opal!" he called, stepping into the open.

She was treading water in the middle of the cove. "Go away!"

"I'm alone," he said. "I won't hurt you."

Her young face looked sullen as she kept her distance from him out in the water, and she called again for him to go away.

"Get some clothes on," Webbe said. "I'll wait."

The girl hesitated, then abruptly swam out of sight around the opposite side of the house. Webbe made no move to follow. For the few minutes when he couldn't see her he felt his scalp prickle and he wiped the nape of his neck and wondered what kind of a fool he was. Then Opal reappeared in the water, towing a long yellow towel. She swam directly toward him and then came out of the water, holding the towel, and it seemed to Webbe she was deliberately slow in wrapping it around her body. Her mouth

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curled in a caustic smile as his eyes touched her and then she splashed across the narrow beach, her walk almost mincing.

"When are you going to learn that Rory don't want any help from you, Davey? How did you find this place, anyway?" she asked.

Webbe said: "Rory and I always came here when we were kids. I just had a hunch, that's all. Under the veranda, I remember, the tide scooped out a hollow spot, like a cave. Is it still there?"

She was startled. "Yes."

"Is that where you and Rory hid last night when the police threw a dragnet over the island?"

"Yes."

"Look, Opal, I just want to talk to him, that's all. I want to help him. And I want you to help me with him. You're in love with him, aren't you?"

She smiled. "I'm his woman."

"Then you want what's best for Rory, don't you?"

Her eyes were guarded. "Whatever Rory wants to do is all right with me. We belong together. We understand things that other people just ignore or laugh at. We're two of a kind, Mr. Webbe. I don't care about that Stella Kittinger now. It don't hurt so much now, anyways. And I'm not really mad at Rory for going with her, like he did. I've got him back now. And I'm going to keep him. Nobody is going to take him from me."

There was savagery in the girl's voice that Webbe had not heard before. He stood watching her, and she looked away, her eyes veiled. Webbe said: "Just let me talk to him, Opal. Please."

She pushed slim fingers through her cropped, wet hair. She grinned. "You're cute. But you're crazy."

"Perhaps. Is Rory in the house?"

She laughed. "He's right behind you, Davey."

## CHAPTER NINE

RORY LOOKED THE WORSE for wear since their encounter at the boathouse last night. He still held Webbe's gun in his good hand, and there seemed to be more blood clotted on the improvised sling around his left arm. There was no friendliness in his eyes as he looked at Webbe. Then he ducked his head at Opal.

"Get in the house and put some clothes on, Opal. Damned if I know what to make out of a tramp like you."

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"Don't you call me that!" Opal snapped.

"Then stop acting like your sister and get decent."

"All right, I'm going," the girl said hastily. She looked at Webbe and laughed bleakly. "Don't slug him until I get back, honey."

She walked lazily across the hot sunlit beach toward the old house. Webbe resisted the instinct to watch her.

"You knew I was here?" Rory asked quietly.

"It wasn't hard to figure. I knew you hadn't gotten off the island, with the sheriff throwing up his roadblocks, and this is the first place I thought of."

"How is it you didn't come here with the cops, Davey?"

"I wanted to talk to you first," Webbe said. "You know I'm leveling with you when I say you haven't got a chance, Rory. You'll get caught soon — maybe even today. Dig Trury knows you're hiding out near here. If they catch you, it's going to be tough. Luke Kittinger's newspaper isn't pulling any punches. Everybody thinks you killed Merl."

"Hell, you know I didn't do that," Rory growled.

"I don't know anything for sure any more."

Rory said: "Look, I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I didn't mean to shoot that little Oliver fellow. I just went to the cannery to see Opal. I don't know what got into me. So all this money was there and I just took it to help me get away, that's all."

"But you came here to get even with Luke, didn't you?"

"I was going to kill him," Rory muttered.

"But you don't feel that way now?"

"All I want is out. I feel scared, Davey. I don't know what's happening. I guess I've made one mistake after the other. I don't know anything about Merl. You remember how it used to be when we were kids, Davey. Merl was always wonderful to us. I'd never hurt him, no matter what. All I want now is to get hold of Kittinger's plane and get away from here, that's all."

"Running will only make it worse later on, Rory."

"Listen, don't mix me up. I know what I'm doing."

"Don't run for it," Webbe said. "Listen to me."

"You want me to just give up? To let Kittinger shoot me like I was a crazy hound dog? Or maybe let a mob in Prince John string me up?"

"No," Webbe said. "I don't want any of that. I told you, I want to help you. Forget about Luke's plane and running for it. Just trust me. If the cops get you now, things will be tough, I know. But if we can hold them off for a few days until this cools down, and if you don't lose your head and make things impossible for me, I might be able to get you some cover until proper arrangements can be made."

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Rory didn't answer. Webbe watched Opal cross the brook toward them. She had put on a plaid skirt and a man's blue shirt and her short hair glistened wetly in the hot sunlight.

"Opal?"

"Keep quiet!" she called softly.

Rory's glance ranged the nearby brush. There was a quick, primitive tightening of the cords in his neck. Webbe listened, too, and at first he heard nothing. The brook still filled the quiet air with its lazy bubbling. Then he heard it — the high, distant yelping of hounds.

Rory sucked in a long breath and swung toward Webbe with lowering brows. He licked his lips and gestured with the gun.

"Did you tell the sheriff where to find me, Davey?"

"No," Webbe said. "I told you once. No."

The sound of the dogs came louder and clearer. Opal ran toward them along the pebbly beach. Her face was frightened.

Rory said thickly: "Did they see you come here, Davey?"

"They might have. Kittinger's plane flew over as I was coming across. They saw my boat clearly." Webbe made a quick decision. "You and Opal get into the water. They've probably got something with your scent on it, for the dogs." He began scuffing at the coarse sand, moving quickly. "The dogs won't smell you in the water. Can you get back into the cave under the porch?"

"Sure, but it won't do me any good if I leave you here to tell them about it, Davey."

"You have no choice," Webbe said harshly. "If they saw me from the plane, they know I'm here already. Make up your mind, Rory."

Again Rory hesitated. Opal's face was white, her eyes twisting from one to the other. She said urgently: "Come on, Rory. We have to take the chance."

"All right." Rory looked hard at Webbe. "Remember, Davey, I'll have my gun ready all the time. Don't make any wrong plays."

Rory floundered into the water and Opal followed. Rory and the girl waded into water up to their hips, then ducked out of sight into the dark shadows under the porch.

Webbe turned and faced the path into the woods. A big harlequin Dane burst through the foliage, mouth agape, teeth shining in its red, grinning mouth. A bay of triumph burst on its tongue as it saw Webbe on the beach. Another dog, and then another, burst into view. The sound of the car and the shouting men still seemed far away.

Like one, the pack of dogs swung toward Webbe and jumped for him.

It was too late to find a weapon. The harlequin left the ground in a

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powerful spring, jaws snapping. Webbe ducked aside and the heavy body struck his shoulder and threw him to one knee. He scrambled up swiftly and saw the dog twist in midair to come down facing him. He yelled, the sound bursting in his throat and slipped into the water. A second dog jumped and caught the sleeve of his shirt and ripped it away. The harlequin charged again. Webbe drove his fist at the brute's head, his knuckles slamming at the ravening jaws. Then above the tumult of the dog pack came the shrill blast of a whistle, and the dogs fell back. Webbe, up to his waist in the water, looked toward the shore again.

Several men were climbing out of a jeep that had been rammed right through the brush to the edge of the cove. Others were running from the path. They were all armed with rifles and shotguns. Dig Trury appeared and shouted to the dogs and blew his whistle again and the animals retreated reluctantly from where Webbe stood in the water.

"Come out of there!" the sheriff shouted.

Webbe waded slowly back to the beach. His legs trembled, and he had trouble drawing a deep breath. The dogs surrounded him, growling, but made no further attacks. He looked toward the jeep and saw Luke Kittinger jump down from it and approach them with long, angry strides.

"What in hell are you doing here, Webbe? Those dogs could have killed you!" he shouted. "Don't you know we're searching the island?"

"No, I didn't know that," Webbe said.

"Cal saw you from the plane. Why did you put in here?" Kittinger asked suspiciously. "Is your brother in that house?"

"Look for yourself," Webbe said.

Kittinger looked sullen, as if disappointment were not to be tolerated. "Have your men search that house, sheriff," he demanded.

Dig Trury reacted mildly to Kittinger's authoritative air. It was evident at once that Trury only tolerated Luke's interference by deliberate control. Trury looked at Webbe, his eyes neither friendly nor inimical. "Are you all right, Davey?"

"Yes, thanks. The dogs didn't quite get to me."

"Looking for Rory in that house?"

"I thought he might be there, but I haven't been inside yet."

Kittinger said impatiently: "Sheriff, we're wasting time!"

Webbe waited on the beach while the sheriff and Kittinger led the other men toward the shabby old house. They moved with swift caution, their guns ready. Nothing stirred in the shadowed waters under the house.

Dig Trury came out first. His thin face told Webbe nothing. One of the deputies leaned over the porch rail and spat tobacco juice into the water. Another climbed down on the beach and hunkered on the sand to peer

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into the gloom under the porch. He seemed to study the shadows for an eternity. Then he called something to Trury and the call returned over the brook to where Webbe stood on the beach. Trury halted in front of him.

"All right, Davey, where is he?"

"I can't say," Webbe replied.

"You put your boat in here for some reason, not just a hunch. Don't fool with me, Davey. I warn you. You have my personal promise that I'll do everything I can. Isn't that enough?"

"No, I'm afraid it isn't, Dig."

Kittinger said roughly: "What's this all about? Is Rory hiding somewhere around here, Webbe?"

"You didn't find him, did you?" Webbe said.

The dogs sniffed restlessly around the scuff marks Webbe had made in the sand. Webbe tried not to look at them. Sheriff Trury stared across the cove and then shrugged. "All right, Davey. Get in your boat and take it away from here. Right now. And don't come back."

Webbe nodded. "Whatever you say."

Rather than return the way he had come, Webbe sailed north across the glassy water and tied up at Kittinger's boathouse a mile up the shore. It was two o'clock in the afternoon now. The air was as still as death. No one was in sight. He made the sloop fast and stared curiously at the broken railing where Rory had attacked him last night, then turned inside a doorway into the boathouse itself. A flight of wooden steps led up to an apartment above, where a locked door barred his way. He tried the door, wondering about the rooms beyond it, but the building felt empty and deserted and he gave up and went outside again beyond the slip where the runabout was moored.

The graceful house looked dazzling white on its green lawned knoll overlooking the bay. The beach was empty. He turned up the path and entered the house through its kitchen doorway. She wore a white chenille beach jacket and her long legs were smoothly tanned. A blue ribbon tied up her rich, dark red hair. Her face was calm and clear despite the violet smudges under her eyes. Her snug blue bathing suit revealed a surprising figure. Her glance was unfriendly as Webbe sat down on a stool beside her.

"Well, have you come to make your peace with Luke?" she asked. "Or is it to see Stella?"

"Neither," said Webbe.

"What did Stella tell you about me this morning?"

"Nothing."

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"Didn't she tell you how I felt about you?"

"Hilda, stop it."

"Aren't you satisfied with this morning?" she asked. "Do you have to come here to Luke's house to see her again?"

"Yes, I have to see her again," Webbe said. "I'm going to tell her something, once and for all." He wondered when he had made the certain and definite decision to finish it. "I'm going to see her just once more, and that will be it. All of it. You believe me, don't you?"

"I want to believe it," she said quietly. "More than anything. Now you see how shameless I can be."

"I'm glad," Webbe said.

He got up and walked alone through the big shadowed house that belonged to Luke and Stella, and went out through the front door. He didn't meet anyone. He followed the driveway past the stone gatehouse and then turned right along a dirt road until he reached a small modern bungalow with a shed roof, stood there, hugging the insecure land, open to the cool wind and the hot sun. Webbe remembered that Kittinger had bought out the architect-owner from Baltimore because he didn't want anyone else living on Three Fingers. This was the place where Stella had asked him to meet her at three o'clock.

"Stella?" he called.

His voice echoed strangely, and there was no answer. He began to consider exactly what he would say to her and what she would do when he told her he was not in love with her. It would not be easy.

He called her name again, then checked himself as he heard a faint scuffling sound from the next room. The bungalow consisted mainly of the living room, open from wall to wall. He listened, but the sound was not repeated. He crossed to what looked like a bar and opened the cabinet and found an assortment of liquor bottles, then opened the long wall of closets that flanked the fireplace. The first section was empty. In the next he found several beach robes and brightly colored sandals and a woman's brief bathing suit and a small blue cloth bag. This much he assumed was Stella's. He wasn't so sure about the rest of it. There was a man's beach robe beside hers, and a pair of man's sandals on the floor, too.

It was while he was looking in the closet that the bedroom door was opened and Henry Paul Plumm came into sight. Webbe spun on his heel, seeing panic on Plumm's pale face and the small revolver glinting in his hand. Then he plunged across the room and caught Plumm's arm and spun him around so that Plumm was thrown, bouncing, onto one of the big couches.

"What's all this?" Webbe asked. "Where did you come from?"

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Plumm's breath made a queer whistling noise. His face was shiny with sweat. He swallowed and said: "Get out of here, Davey."

"What is it? Are you in trouble?"

"Yes, a lot of trouble. You'll be in it, too, if you don't get out of here. I didn't do it, but who will believe me?"

"Do what?"

"Or who will believe *you*, for that matter?"

Webbe tasted metallic fear in the back of his mouth. "You stay right here, Henry."

"Don't be a fool! Come with me."

"Stay here." Webbe started away, then said: "What are you doing with that gun, Henry?"

"I don't know."

"Give it to me," said Webbe.

Plumm handed him the gun. His hands shook violently. Webbe weighed the gun in his hand and looked at the balding man. Plumm shivered.

"Stay here," Webbe said once more.

He got as far as the open bedroom door when he heard Plumm suddenly jump up and run for the front door. He turned and saw the man running over the beach, and decided there was no point in giving chase then. He went into the bedroom.

The draperies were drawn over the windows here, and the air felt hot and close and dark. He didn't see anything unusual. It was just a bedroom, and the only point that could be called strange was that it was furnished as if for daily use, although he had supposed the house to be abandoned after Luke Kittinger bought out its former owner. Webbe realized he still held the gun he had taken from Henry Paul, and he tossed it to the bed and then went deeper into the room until he saw the dead man who sprawled between the bed and the windows.

It was Luke Kittinger.

He had been shot point-blank in the face.

## CHAPTER TEN

WEBBE WANTED TO back out of the house and start running. Then he thought he was going to be suddenly and violently sick. He did neither. He drew a long breath and forced himself to stand there quietly and look at the dead man.

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He felt nothing whatever toward Luke Kittinger. Luke had deserved killing, for any number of reasons that had nothing to do with public law or morality. Yet no man deserved to die like this, Webbe thought.

Webbe stood still in the shadowed heat and listened to the steady pulse in his ears. He thought of Henry Paul, and of Stella, and then he looked at his watch and saw it was exactly three o'clock, the time she was to meet him here. He wondered when and why Luke had separated himself from the sheriff's posse, and the only reason that occurred to him was that Luke had known about this rendezvous and had come here to interrupt it. His thoughts twisted and turned against the panic closing in on his mind, and he thought of all the reasons that might make the police think he had done this thing. He began to back slowly out of the room.

When he was halfway out he heard the car coming across the beach, and he laughed softly, without humor. Stella was driving. She came across the hard-packed sand and parked near the door and got out, with the sun shining through the soft linen of her skirt and burnishing the crisp silver-blonde of her hair.

"Stella, you're right on time," Webbe greeted her.

"Thank you, darling." She stood on tiptoe to kiss him, patted his cheek, and leaned against him. "I tried to hurry."

"But you didn't get here soon enough," he said.

"Did you have a long wait, poor darling?"

Her voice was normal. There was nothing different about the way she looked. He began to feel less sure of himself.

Then she said: "Is something wrong? You look so strange."

"Yes."

"What is it, Davey?"

"You'd better look for yourself," he told her.

He let her go into the bedroom first. She hesitated with puzzled curiosity, but there was no real reluctance in her walk, nothing to show that she was prepared for what she saw. Webbe didn't look at Luke's body. He watched Stella's golden face, feeling a queer detachment as her mouth opened and her amber eyes dilated. He listened to the small sound in her throat and saw the way one hand came up as if to ward off the sight of her husband's body. It looked good. He was convinced. He felt ashamed of what he had been thinking.

When she started to slide down toward the floor he caught her around the waist quickly and held her up and forced her to walk back into the living room. "I'm sorry, Stella. That was stupid and unforgiveable. I wasn't thinking straight. I just came in myself and found him like that."

"Did you?" she whispered.

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"Yes. I don't know any more about it than you."

"It was Rory, wasn't it? We'll have to tell the police. Rory did it."

"I don't think so," Webbe said.

"But who else could have done it?"

Webbe thought of Plumm, but said nothing. Yet his hesitation was fatal. "David, darling, you didn't —?"

"No," he said roughly. His voice was too loud, and he made an effort to speak more quietly. "Don't even think it, Stella."

"But you were here with him —"

"He was already dead."

"Did you quarrel with him, David? Was he here waiting for us when you came in? He must have found out about us somehow. Maybe Cal Trotter — he was always snooping around. Maybe Cal sent him here. If Luke goaded you into shooting him —"

Webbe slapped her. Her voice was high, riding toward open hysteria, and he hoped the blow would sting her back to sanity. Her eyes widened and she shrank farther away from him, clinging to the door. She was going to run away. Fear of him shone clearly in the way she stared, in the twist of her mouth. He felt sick.

"Stella, I'm sorry. Believe me, I didn't do it."

He pushed past her and went outside into the hot sunlight scorching the beach. He walked a little way and then sat down, hugging his knees, and stared blankly at the brightness of the Chesapeake. He shook with cold despite the baking heat of the sun.

Stella came out of the bungalow and walked across the sand toward him. She wore a blue leather belt around her linen dress and a Paisley scarf over her head. She looked beautiful. It seemed impossible that Luke Kittinger was sprawled in death in the house behind her. She leaned over him and kissed Webbe on the cheek.

"Darling, I'm sorry. I'm just upset. But I'm not sorry it happened. I'm almost grateful. I hated him so; I can only feel relief that he's dead, even if it's such an ugly thing."

They walked across the beach toward her green car and she said: "Davey, I'm free now."

"Not yet."

"But in a little while, everything Luke had will be mine. Houses, cars, newspapers — everything. I'll give it all to you."

"No, thanks," he said wryly.

"Don't you want it?"

"I don't know what I want."

"But you wanted me, didn't you? Enough to risk doing this?"

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"Stella, I told you I didn't do it!"

She said quickly: "We mustn't quarrel now, darling. We must help each other. What happened couldn't be avoided. You must look at it that way. We'll get out of this all right. Money can buy anything. Luke's money is mine now, and I'll spend every cent of it, if I have to, to make things right for us. The sheriff won't be any trouble. He can be bought."

"I don't think so," said Webbe.

They were at the car. Webbe looked inside and saw the ignition keys in the lock and said: "Let's go. We're wasting time."

Then he looked across the car at the rutted road that came across the beach from the underbrush. A jeep had come out of the woods and was grinding across the sand toward them. Cal Trotter was driving. Hilda Brewster sat beside him.

"Old home week," Webbe said wryly. "We're having a convention at this hideout of yours that nobody is supposed to know about."

The jeep crossed the beach and stopped behind Stella's car, blocking its escape. Cal Trotter jumped out and didn't bother to help Hilda. The red-haired girl sat stiffly on the front seat. Her face was white. Her eyes moved from Webbe to Stella and back again. Webbe swung to face Trotter, and Trotter said harshly: "What's going on here?"

"What makes you think anything is going on?"

"Luke showed up, didn't he?" Trotter looked at Stella, his arrogant face anxious. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Cal."

"What happened?"

Webbe said: "Go see for yourself. Inside."

Trotter scowled with the lowering sun in his eyes. He wore a gabardine coat over his open shirt, and it hung open enough for Webbe to see the shape of his shoulder holster. Danger touched the back of his mind. He saw Stella move away toward the Cadillac, and then Cal Trotter walked around the house and vanished inside.

Hilda Brewster came from the jeep to stand beside Webbe. Her voice was low. "David, you must get out of here."

"Why did you come?"

"I wanted to be sure you were all right." Her smile was wry. "Luke came back to the house alone from the posse. He was in a perfect fury. Trotter was waiting to tell him about your date with Stella here. I don't know how Trotter found out about it, but you know how he is. So Luke came straight here, and I've been terrified ever since, thinking of what might happen."

"Well, it did," Webbe said bluntly. "Luke is dead."

She stared at him. "Dead?"

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"I found him that way. I don't know who did it, but Henry Paul was here when I arrived. He was in the house with the body, and he ran away before I knew what had happened."

"But Henry wouldn't —"

"You said he was acting strangely ever since Luke slapped him around last night. He was in the *Call* office today, too. He said I wouldn't need any stones for my slingshot any more. I didn't pay much attention to him, but it only means that Luke was going to get killed and Henry was thinking of killing him."

Hilda trembled. "I don't believe that. I can't."

"Nor I," said Webbe. He looked toward the beach house. He felt numb, as if he had just been dealt a low blow. Trotter was still in the house. He looked at Stella, in the other car, and her face was cold and strange. She didn't look at him. She seemed expectant, waiting for Trotter's return.

Then Cal Trotter came out of the beach house, walking back to the parked cars. His coat swung open, showing his holstered gun again.

"All right, Webbe. Let's go to the sheriff."

Hilda said: "Why? What has David done?"

"He killed Luke. It's plain enough," Trotter said. He looked at Stella. "Did he, Stella?"

"I'm not sure," Stella said. Her voice was cold. "I found Webbe in there and Luke was already dead. There was a gun on the bed —"

"I have it now," Trotter said.

The thought of the gun hit Webbe like another blow. He had taken it from Henry Paul, handled it, and tossed it to the bed in repugnance after finding Luke's body. The gun had his prints on it.

Trotter said: "Come on, Webbe."

There was thick satisfaction in his voice. Webbe saw him draw the revolver from its holster and the gesture touched off his panic in a physical explosion; and he swung hard at the weapon. The edge of his palm sliced at Trotter's wrist and knocked the gun spinning out of the man's fingers into the sand. Trotter cursed and they both dived to retrieve it at once. Webbe felt the jolt of the other's shoulder and touched one hand and knee on the sand, scrambling for the weapon. Trotter was like a big cat, swift and agile, and he regained the gun first. Webbe saw the quick, satisfied intent in his eyes and suddenly knew that his impulse to resist had played right into Trotter's hands. Trotter wanted to kill him. Trotter was in love with Stella and wanted her for himself, now that Luke was out of the way. It was all very clear and deadly simple in Webbe's mind, all in an instant.

He saw the death in Trotter's eyes and fear lent him a sudden spurt of strength. He jumped for the gun and got a hand on the barrel and twisted

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it aside, and the revolver bucked and jumped as Trotter triggered a shot into the sand. The big man grunted and tried to wrench free, his hooded eyes hating Webbe, his teeth glistening in the sunlight. Webbe got a heel behind his foot and leaned his weight against the man's body and twisted suddenly. Trotter went over with a grunt, spilling his length on the sand. Webbe stamped a heel on Trotter's wrist and the gun squirted from his fingers. There was a fury in him that matched Trotter's lust to kill. Trotter started up, bracing his hands behind him, and Webbe flexed his knee and slammed it up under the man's jaw. Trotter flopped back again like a fish out of water, his eyes filmed, and Webbe kicked the gun out of reach, watching the weapon lift and flash in the sun before it landed in a thicket nearby. Then he swung back to the two girls.

Hilda whispered: "David, you didn't kill Luke, did you?"

"I didn't kill anybody." He looked at Stella, then strode toward the jeep. Hilda ran after him. "You can't run away!" she cried.

"I've got to."

He kicked the jeep's motor alive. Stella scrambled out of her car and ran toward Trotter's prone figure. Hilda looked stricken. The jeep's wheels spun in the loose sand, then caught and the car lurched forward to the rutted road that led inland. Hilda suddenly screamed a warning. Twisting, Webbe saw Trotter on one elbow while Stella searched the thicket for the gun. He had thought it safely out of the way, but he saw Stella get up with the weapon in her hand and run back to Trotter, crying out something. She thrust the gun into Trotter's hand and the man lifted himself higher. The muzzle winked and the windshield starred and shattered. Webbe tramped on the gas pedal and hunched lower over the wheel. A second shot screamed off the flat hood. He felt dangerously exposed, urging the jeep across the open beach. The distance to the line of brush seemed endless. Two more shots followed before he closed the gap. The last shot made the jeep bounce and slew as a front tire blew out. At the same moment he saw the gleam of another car approaching through the scrub, and then the sheriff's open touring sedan appeared, with four deputies in it. The jeep skidded out of the road ruts, running berserk toward the woods, and Webbe let his weight go and slid out of the wild car. He landed on one shoulder, rolled over, and came up running.

He heard Trotter shout and he looked back once and saw the sheriff's car stopped beside the stalled jeep. The men from it were fanning out after him while Trotter ran to join them, still yelling. He saw Hilda running, too, but Stella remained in her car. He spurred his legs to a faster pace and plunged headlong into the brush.

A shotgun roared, and then another. The foliage closed around him and

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tore at his face and clothing in his reckless flight. The air whistled in his lungs. Panic clawed at his mind, more dangerous than the hindrance of the undergrowth, and he fought it down. He had a fairly good start on his pursuers. He broke into an open glade, then sprinted across it to plunge into a more densely wooded area where the low beach growth was thinner and he had firmer footing. After a few moments he swung right, recrossing the rough auto road that paralleled the beach, and slowed to a jog to regain his breath.

Gradually the sounds of pursuit faded behind him.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SUN WAS almost down when he reached the causeway to the mainland. His body ached everywhere, and the scratches on his face and arms burned hotly. He felt dirty and disheveled and exhausted by the evasive tactics he had used to work his way across the island, away from the deputies. So far he had not tried to plan too far ahead, content with his momentary freedom and the immediate problems of staying in the clear. As he looked at the causeway, his further hopes ebbed. Now for the first time he began to think more clearly about his situation and his mind revolved around Stella's quick insistence that he was the one who had killed Luke, and he remembered the way she had helped Trotter regain the gun. Maybe he had made a mistake in breaking away from Trotter to put himself temporarily in a position of admitted guilt because of his flight. Then he remembered the look of death in Trotter's eyes and knew he'd had no choice at that moment. He remembered the man's clothing in the closet at the beach house and he grinned wryly, thinking of Cal Trotter's long role as the robot servant of Luke Kittinger. It had taken Stella only a few brief months to corrupt the man's long loyalty. He was suddenly sure that the clothing in the beach house belonged to Trotter. He saw Stella without illusion now — a cold and ruthless woman, without compassion, consumed with an ambition for wealth and power that was almost an obsession. It was not impossible, he thought, that Stella killed Luke herself.

He saw no way out of the trap. As long as he remained on the island, he was slated for eventual capture. He listened to several cars pass on the road, their headlights a bright flare through the dusk as they rushed by. Soon the island would be swarming with state troopers and deputies, and it was only a matter of time until the outcry over Kittinger's death provoked

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a determined search that was certain to catch him in the net.

It took an hour to circle the landing field and work toward the cove he had visited this morning. The moon was just rising as he stepped onto the beach and looked at the abandoned house where he had found Rory and Opal. It seemed deserted. He felt the sharp irony of his being here as a fugitive. Pausing, he looked and listened, but the moonlight was silent on the water. He found the deputy only as he neared the plank walk that crossed the brook.

The deputy sprawled just off the sand, half hidden in the onyx and silver shadows of the brush. Webbe almost stumbled over his legs, then stepped back and saw the man's head lift, his face a patch of frightened white. The deputy was tied hand and foot, and gagged as well with a dirty strip of cloth. He had no gun. Webbe hunkered down beside him without touching the lines that tied the man.

"Did Rory tie you up?" he whispered.

The man's head nodded violently.

"Were you left to watch this place?"

There were more eager nods, and a muffled pleading sound from behind the gag. Webbe said, "Sorry." He straightened and didn't touch the bound man, and went on toward the brook. The plank boards creaked under his weight. Nobody challenged him.

For a moment he felt worried lest he had come here too late. Pausing, he faced the moonlit house and called softly: "Rory?"

Only the quiet surf replied. The windows were a shimmering reflection of the night sky. Webbe stepped up on the porch over the water and went to the door, and as he touched the knob he heard a deep, soft laugh.

"Don't move, Davey. I've been waiting for you. It took you long enough to make it."

Webbe turned to the shadows in a corner of the porch. "You've been waiting for me, Rory?"

"Sure. Opal used that little portable radio of hers. She heard a newscast, how you blew your stack. I'm kind of surprised, Davey, you always being such a good, solid citizen." Rory stirred a little and his big outline suddenly became distinct. He was sprawled in one of the broken-down rockers, his bad arm hugged to his thick chest. In his other hand he held the .38 Browning that belonged to Webbe.

"I didn't kill Luke," Webbe said.

Opal moved toward Rory, put a slim, tanned hand on his big shoulder. "You're no better than us, now," she said.

Rory laughed. The sound was soft, but bitter. "You were framed, hey, Davey? It's an old song."

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"I need help," Webbe said, ignoring him. "We can't stay on this island for long. They'll cover every inch of it by morning. Somebody will come to relieve that deputy you tied up on shore, and that will tear it."

"We'll be gone by then," Rory said flatly.

"When you go, I'm going with you."

"Davey, you can tell them the truth, and they'll believe you. It's not the same with me. I'm done for. I can't get near that airfield now, not a chance of it. But you don't want to come with me. I'm going to run fast and far."

Opal spoke quietly. "Rory, honey, maybe he can help us. You're sick, and I can't do much."

"I'm not sick," Rory snapped. "It's only my arm."

"You've got a fever," the girl insisted. "You said so yourself. And you fell down and you've been sitting in that chair for the last two hours. Don't tell me you're not sick. That arm is infected, and you've got to have help."

"I'm all right, I tell you!" Rory moved in the chair, and a stray glimmer of moonlight shone on his big brass belt buckle. Rory said: "Level with me, David. I know you better than you think. Did you kill Luke?"

"No," Webbe said.

"Who did it, then?"

Webbe said: "I thought it might be you."

"Damn it, David —"

"That's what you came here to do, isn't it?"

"Maybe. But you talked me out of it. Not that it makes any difference, but I can tell you I didn't kill Kittinger. He needed killing, and I'm all for the guy who did it, but it wasn't me. I wasn't near that beach house."

"How do you know where he was killed?"

"Opal heard it on the radio. I don't like this, David. I don't like what you're thinking. I don't care if you killed Luke or not, I'm ready to help you, and no questions asked. We're in the same boat now. But I don't like your thinking I did something when I tell you I didn't. If you feel that way, I say to hell with you and your sermons, and get out."

Rory got up with the vehemence of his words and then staggered and Webbe moved forward as his legs buckled and he crashed against the porch rail.

"You need a doctor," Webbe said.

"Big Mary will get me one."

"Is she coming here?"

"Yes."

"How does she know where to find you?"

"Opal got in touch with her. She just walked up to that beach house on the north point and used the telephone there."

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Webbe swung to the girl and saw her shrink away from him. "When were you there?"

"This afternoon. Nobody saw me," she whispered.

"When, exactly?"

"I don't know."

"Was Luke Kittinger there when you used that telephone?"

"I don't know, I didn't look."

"You found him dead there, didn't you?"

"Yes," she whispered suddenly. "I mean, he wasn't dead yet, but he was dying, sure enough."

"Did you speak to him?"

"He was past speaking to anybody."

"Was anyone else there?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't have used the phone, if there was. I wouldn't have gone in, if I thought somebody was there."

"Where was the gun?" Webbe asked. "Did you see it?"

She nodded her cropped head. "On the floor. By his hand."

"Did you touch it?"

She shook her head. "I don't know any more. Honest. I just made the call, and then I thought I'd look around the place, it was fixed up so pretty." She paused, went on plaintively: "When Rory ditched me for Stella Kittinger, I figured it was because she had all them nice things — all that money, and those clothes. If I had some of that, Rory wouldn't ever look at any other woman. If ever he does again, I'll kill him. You hear, Rory? I could be as good as Stella, any time, with the money she got. Better. Lots better." She halted again, as if surprised by her lapse, and said sullenly: "Anyway, I just went in to look at the furniture and things; and so I found Luke. I got out of there fast and came back here, that's all."

Webbe was dissatisfied, as if there was something more here he ought to know about. He looked at Rory, and knelt beside the big man. Rory's face shone with sweat. He laughed at Webbe and lifted the gun and put the cold muzzle under Webbe's chin.

"You behave, kid. You hear me?"

"All I want is to get off this island," Webb said.

"You want to go all the way with me?"

"Just off the island."

"Then what?"

"On my own, Rory," Webbe said.

Rory lowered his gun. Opal said in a shaken voice, "Maybe we all ought to have a drink on that."

"I could use one," Webbe said.

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It was two hours before the oyster boat came gliding silently into the cove.

Opal shook Rory awake. "My sister is here," she said.

The oyster boat came in without running lights, a dim gliding shape on the calm water. A soft hail reached them, and Opal replied briefly. There was enough depth of water for the boat to come right up to the edge of the porch, and as it approached, Webbe saw Big Mary at the wheel. He fended off the bow with his foot and caught the line the girl threw him, then heard her exclamation of surprise.

"What's *he* doing here, Opal?"

Opal giggled oddly. "The cops are after him, too."

Big Mary looked at Webbe with hostility. "You with us?"

"I'll go as far as Fisher's Point. I'll swim ashore from there. After that, I haven't decided," Webbe said.

"I don't like it. The cops will pick you up, and you'll give us all away."

Rory said: "You talk too much. Shut up and give me a hand."

The big woman looked at Rory more closely. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's my arm," Rory said. "It's broken. Now let's get this tub moving."

Big Mary looked at Webbe with open enmity. "I still don't like it. You don't belong with us, mister. If I had my way, I'd —"

Rory hit her hard across the mouth. The big girl yelped and lost her footing and crashed to the deck, long muscular legs askew.

"Now will you shut up?" he grated. He turned to Webbe. "Give me a hand to the bunk, Davey."

Big Mary scrambled to her feet. "What about the money? Aren't you taking it with you? Where is it?"

Rory paused, his weight heavy on Webbe's shoulder. He breathed hard, and an odor of illness came from him. He looked at Opal. "You little bitch," he said softly. "What are you trying to do?"

Opal said quickly: "Honey, I figured it would be safer to leave it hidden like it is."

"So you could come back later with your sister and get it?"

"No, Rory, honest! I just thought —" She paused. "I'll get it, Rory, if you want it."

"Yes, I want it. Do that," he said bitterly. "And bring it all!"

Opal clambered over the porch rail and vanished into the house. She came back a minute later, carrying a small black leather bag. Rory took it from her and felt the brass lock and weighed it tentatively in his hand. Opal said: "I didn't touch it, honey, honest. I really thought it'd be best if we left it hidden like it was."

"I'll bet," Rory said. He turned to Webbe. "Come on."

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

He had been walking endlessly, following the beach through swamp and thickets, his clothes wet from his half-mile swim to Fisher's Point, and he guessed it was after nine o'clock when he turned into the road to his house. It seemed a long time since he had left it this morning. He saw nothing to alarm him. Under the dim moon, the familiar bungalow looked cool and secure. When he was about fifty yards away he saw the car parked behind his bungalow and he came to an abrupt halt.

The car looked familiar and he walked through the tall weeds along the road until he recognized it as Henry Paul Plumm's big sedan. He stepped out into the moonlight then and crossed the driveway to look inside it. Nobody was in it. His feet made long whispering sounds as he moved around the house to the plank walk that led to the front door from the dock. He tried the door, and it wasn't locked. He went inside.

Instantly something moved in the shadows and he jumped to one side. There was a gasp and a soft blow that he scarcely felt and then he drove into the dim figure and hurled it downward to the couch beside the window. He was immediately aware of his mistake, his hands recognizing the body of a girl. He felt her squirm in panic and he spoke in a quick, quiet voice:

"Be still. It's all right."

"David?"

"Don't make any noise." He saw it was Hilda Brewster and he relaxed his grip on her and stood back, swaying on his feet. "Is anybody here with you?"

"No. I came alone."

"What for?"

"I don't know. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't know where to go, and I thought of this place and I liked it, so I came here. I was expecting you."

"What made you think I'd come here?" Webbe asked.

"It was just a hope. Or a wish. I couldn't think of anywhere else you might go. You're in terrible trouble, David. They're looking everywhere for you."

"And they'll be here soon," he said. Somehow he managed a laugh. "I always seem to be dripping wet when I see you, Hilda. I came to change my clothes."



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"You don't have to hurry. They've been here and gone."

He looked at her. "Who?"

"Two men. I suppose they were police."

He thought of the two hoodlums of yesterday and asked Hilda to describe the men she thought were police. She described the two punks who had beaten him up on Newcomb's Lane the day before. They had just been leaving, as she arrived, and she had managed to avoid them until they were gone. Webbe listened to the concern in her voice and was aware of a deep gratitude for her presence that lifted him out of his dull exhaustion.

"Change your clothes," she said. "Don't waste time."

"Yes."

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked.

"I feel as if I had never seen you before." Webbe knelt in front of her as she sat in the chair and put a finger under her chin and lifted her head so he could see her face. When he looked into Hilda's face he saw she was more beautiful than he had ever dreamed of. He traced the wetness of tears on her cheek with his forefinger. Suddenly he wanted to say things he had never said before, words he had never been urged to express to Stella. He stood up and kissed her mouth. Her lips were soft and warm and tasted of her silent tears.

"I'll change my clothes," he said quietly.

In the bedroom, he put on a gray flannel shirt and dark slacks and changed into fresh socks and dark blue sneakers that he usually used for sailing. He had some money tucked away in a dresser drawer and he counted it in the moonlight. Thirty-seven dollars. He took his keys and wallet from his wet slacks and a dry pack of cigarettes and went back to the living room. Hilda wasn't there.

She was standing outside on the moonlit beach near Plumm's car. She turned as she heard his footsteps. "David, why did you kiss me?"

"I wanted to," he said simply.

"Because I just happened to be here?"

"No. It's more than that. Much more."

"When did you find out?"

"Today," he said. He didn't trust himself to go on with it and said abruptly: "I see you have Henry's car. Where is he?"

"Gone. He never came back to the house. I thought he might be here, but there's no trace of him anywhere."

Webbe told her about his encounter with Plumm at the beach house. "I don't know if Henry Paul killed Luke, or not," he said. "But it's one of those things I've got to find out, if I'm ever to clear myself. I think I know where to find him, but you shouldn't come with me."

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"I won't leave you," Hilda said.

"It may be dangerous."

"I don't care."

He didn't really want to send her away. He said: "I think we'd better look for Henry Paul first. He's on the top of the list. After that, I've got to find something that makes sense out of Merl Gannon's death."

"Do you think Gannon and Luke are tied together, somehow?"

"I'm sure of it," Webbe said.

He got into the car with Hilda beside him and drove toward Prince John. He drove not too fast or slow, hoping that Sheriff Trury's road blocks were beyond this point around the town, but not underestimating Trury's intelligence in any way. He breathed a little easier when the first city streets were behind them.

Webbe parked the big sedan behind the Prince John *Call* Building. The lot was deserted and only a night light glowed over the rear entrance to the press room. When he got out of Plumm's car he walked to where he could see the side of the building and there was a dim light in his office, up on the second floor. Hilda was close behind him as he let himself in and went quietly up the stairs. Then he went on and opened the door quietly and saw Henry Plumm behind his desk.

"I've been looking for you, Henry," Webbe said. "Where've you been?"

"Here, most of the time."

"And before that?"

"I'm not sure. Walking and thinking. Did you know the police are looking for you, David?" Plumm asked, with mild curiosity.

"I know," said Webbe. He was surprised at Plumm's sobriety. He saw that Henry Paul had been using his typewriter again and that he had written a new editorial, and he went to the desk and scanned it quickly while Plumm leaned back and lit a cigarette.

"This is good," Webbe said.

Plumm nodded. "Tomorrow's editorial. An appeal to reason."

"We'll print it, if you don't mind."

Plumm was pleased. "Then you'll have to pay me for it, David, because I'm working for you, now."

"I can't pay much. We're almost on the rocks."

"Then I'll work for nothing."

"Thanks, Henry, but —"

"I should thank you. Nobody else would have me."

Webbe said quietly: "Henry, did you kill Luke?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then why did you run away when I came there?"

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Henry Paul suddenly looked frightened. He reached for the bottle of bourbon and slit the seal expertly with his fingernail, then pulled out the cork and poured half a tumberful from the bottle. His hands shook. His wispy hair was disheveled and his bald spot shone in the soft light of the desk lamp. His mouth looked slack and wet as he lifted the glass to his lips. Then, before he drank any of it, he lowered the glass again and put it on the desk and pushed it slowly and reluctantly away from him with his fingertips.

"You're right, you know," he whispered.

"About what?"

"My drinking. I put the bottle here so I wouldn't touch it, and I don't intend to — because I don't remember what happened in that beach house, David. I don't remember how I got there or anything about it until you came in and I found myself holding the gun and looking at Luke's body. I've been telling myself it's the worst blank I ever want to draw — and it's the last."

Hilda whispered: "This is awful."

"So I don't know if I killed Luke or not," said Plumm.

"Are you sure you don't remember?" Webbe asked.

"I know I can't. I've tried."

Webbe tried to quell his angry frustration.

"Take your time, Henry. Meanwhile, you'd better stay here — at least for the night. You can sleep on the couch in Merl Gannon's office."

"That's what I planned to do. But what about you?"

"I have to find out more about all this," Webbe said.

"If the police catch up with you — or that mob —"

"I'll try not to let that happen," Webbe said.

"David, do you think I did it?"

Webbe sighed. "I wish I knew."

"I don't know what I'll do if I remember about it and I know I killed him."

"You'll do the right thing, Henry," Webbe said.

"God help me," Plumm sighed. "I suppose I will."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Webbe let Hilda take the wheel when they left the *Call* Building. She insisted it was safer, and he didn't argue the matter. He told her which streets to follow, and it was still not quite ten o'clock when the big sedan

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turned into the oyster-shell driveway of Merle Gannon's house on the banks of the Prince John River.

There was a light in the room to the left of the hall, and he heard a clink of china from in there, where Merl Gannon had had his den. This was the room he wanted to get into, and he shrugged and walked into the light and paused just inside the doorway.

Lucy Gannon was not too startled by his sudden appearance. She paused with a teacup halfway to her lips, then very gently put it down. Her slight figure was erect and prim in a Queen Anne chair by the fireplace, facing Merl's desk.

She whispered, "Davey."

"I'm glad you're here," Webbe said. "Are you alone?"

She nodded. Her voice was thin, as fragile as the china teacup. "Do you think it wise for you to move about like this, Davey?"

"No, it isn't wise," Webbe said. "But there's nothing else to do except to hide somewhere, and I don't want to hide. I haven't done anything wrong, and I have to prove it, somehow."

"What can I do to help you, Davey?"

He hesitated, not wanting to put it too bluntly. "I want Merl's gun," he said.

"What for?"

"I think I may need it before the night is over."

"No," she said. "I won't give it to you for that, Davey."

"It's in the desk, isn't it?"

"Don't touch it, please."

Her words halted him as he was halfway to the desk. He turned and looked at her. She was pouring fresh tea from the service on the low mahogany coffee table in front of the fireplace. Her face told him nothing.

"I'm sorry, Lucy. I need it."

"Don't make the mistake that Rory made, Davey," she said quietly. "Did you know he was here yesterday? He told me he took your gun, and now see what has happened to him."

Webbe was startled. "Rory was here?"

"Yes, indeed. And he told me how he got out of the county jail. It seems that the cell door wasn't properly locked after you left him on your visit that evening."

"So he just walked out?"

"Apparently." Lucy's smile was wan. "He's changed. He didn't talk like the boy I used to know. I can't understand what has happened to him, but he said he was going to run for it, and I do hope he never stops."

Webbe changed the subject: "About the gun, Lucy."

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"No."

"All right. I'll do without it." He paused. "Do something for me, Lucy. Call Dig Trury and see if he's at the courthouse. If he isn't there, try his home. If you get to speak to him, tell him you're coming to see him in about fifteen minutes."

She did not question his instructions. "Very well."

She got up and left the room to telephone from the hallway, and Webbe lit a cigarette and waited for her to return, hearing her voice murmur from beyond the doorway. Then Lucy came back, moving with quick, sure steps. "Dig Trury says he'll be at home until ten-thirty. He wanted to come over here to save me the trouble, but I insisted that I'd see him. He wanted to know what it was all about, but I said I'd tell him when I saw him."

Webbe stood up. "Thanks, Lucy. Finish your tea."

"Are you going to see the sheriff?"

"Yes. I've got to talk to him."

"Don't go, Davey. He thinks you killed Luke Kittinger."

"I know he does. But I've got to talk to him, and try to make him see some sense in this thing. If I can get him to call off the police hunt for me, it will be a lot easier."

"Don't go, Don't even try."

Webbe said: "Thanks for everything, Lucy."

He kissed her cheek and went out.

Trury's house was closer to the river bank than Gannon's, and he saw a small boat tied up to the stone retaining wall. Webbe walked quietly around to the back door and found it unlocked and stepped into the dark kitchen. He heard Trury's chair scrape back and then the sheriff's voice said, "That you, Lucy?" and he gave up any pretense of stealth and walked into the sheriff's living room.

Trury said: "I'll be dropped on my head."

Turning, he started toward the desk and Webbe saw the sheriff's gun lying there with a sheaf of printed reports that Trury had been working on. He jumped fast and got his hand on the gun before Trury could reach it and snatched it up. Then he backed away until he stood in the doorway again.

"Sorry, Dig, I just want to talk to you."

"You've got more nerve than sense. I've got nothing to say to you except to warn you to put that gun back and give yourself up before you get yourself in worse trouble than you're in right now."

"And what could that be?" Webbe asked. "I haven't a thing to lose, have I?"

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Trury said: "You must be crazy. If that crowd at the courthouse gets sight of you, I won't be responsible for what happens. They're all hopped up for a lynching."

"I know that," said Webbe. "You admit you can't control them, can you?"

"I could call the governor." Trury shrugged. "I'll call for troops if you give yourself up. You and Rory, that is. You got off the island with him somehow, didn't you? It stands to reason. You knew Rory was there all the time, didn't you?"

"I had an idea about it," Webbe said.

"I'm listening," Dig said.

"You've known me most of my life," Webbe said. "You know I'm not a murderer, and you know I'd give anything to have Merl Gannon's death cleared up."

"It's Luke Kittinger that you're tagged for," Trury said.

"And I didn't kill him."

"I've been sheriff for a long time, Davey. I've seen lots of men do foolish things when they've got their backs against the wall, or when some woman addles their good sense."

"That's all nonsense about Stella and me."

"She tells it differently. She says she's still in love with you and she says she's ordering her late husband's corps of legal talent down here to get you off as easily as they can."

"She's only making it worse for me with that," Webbe said, and he was touched by despair. "I don't know why she's so sure that I killed Luke."

"She was the first one there. After you, that is. So she ought to know."

"There were others, Dig," Webbe said. "I guess I'll have to tell you about it, after all." He went on to describe how he had found Rory and Opal, and how Opal had gone to the beach house and found Luke Kittinger dying. He hesitated, and then added what he knew about Henry Paul Plumm. He didn't tell the sheriff that Plumm was asleep in the *Call* Building at that very moment. Trury didn't interrupt with any questions. He went right on, asking about the two hoodlums who seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth, and Trury admitted failure in getting any kind of a line on their identity or purpose. "All these people," said Webbe, "had a good enough reason for losing their heads and killing Luke Kittinger. I'm not saying any one of them did it. Maybe it was Cal Trotter. Or maybe it was Stella. I'm not counting anybody out of it, and I'm asking the same of you, Dig. Just give me a chance."

"Don't think I've neglected anybody you've mentioned," Trury said flatly. His face was hard. "You haven't told me anything new. Coming here

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with a list of candidates doesn't make it look any better for you. You're still right on top of the list. The widow says you did it. You withheld evidence on Rory's whereabouts, and you could have done that just to muddle the picture when you put Luke out of the way, although I'm not saying you'd deliberately use your own brother as the fall guy. But with Luke gone, your newspaper has a better chance to survive, and it looks as if you can have the widow, too, any time you ask her to roll over. I'm speaking plain to you now, Davey. That's the way it looks to me. You started all this with your campaign to get Rory out of jail, you were there twenty minutes before he broke out, and you've been mixed up with Rory ever since. You have a lot of explaining to do."

"You don't really think all that of me, Dig."

"I do."

"And what about Merl Gannon? Who knifed him? Don't you think there's a connection between Merl's death and Kittinger's?"

"Maybe."

"Haven't you done anything at all about Merl?"

"We found the knife," Trury said surprisingly. "It was on the beach, a little way from the boathouse. Hunting knife, buy 'em anywhere, any sporting-goods shop. Some of the oystermen use a knife like it, too. So did Rory. Rory always had one on him. No prints on the hilt. Nice handle, too, better than average. Bone. The tide washed it pretty clean, rolled it around in the sand a bit." The sheriff gave a deep sigh. "I'm working on it, but I'll do better when I have you locked up and out of my way."

"I won't give myself up, Dig."

"You've got to." Trury stood up behind the desk and started to advance adamantly toward Webbe. "Give me my gun, boy. You wouldn't ever shoot me with it."

"Stay where you are," Webbe warned.

The sheriff came on across the room. Webbe felt the sweat start out of him and then Trury reached abruptly for the gun. Webbe snapped it up sharply, the butt cracking under the sheriff's jaw, and Trury's hands went out, grabbing air, and he fell backward before Webbe could catch him and ease his fall. Webbe started to hit him again, a fury in him, and then checked himself and bent over the fallen man and saw that Trury was out cold.

The thought of Hilda steadied him and he straightened from the desk and put the sheriff's gun down on top of the sheaf of police reports. He didn't trust himself with it now.

He said aloud: "I'm sorry, Dig."

Then he turned from the unconscious man and the gun on the desk and went outside, back to Hilda.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AT TEN-THIRTY Webbe watched Hilda come out of the dimly lighted drugstore and walk back along the red brick sidewalk toward the car. He felt better now. He knew exactly what he had to do. Some of it he had decided for himself, and some of it — bits and pieces of words and phrases that others had spoken today — had suddenly fallen together to form a pattern that could possibly be the answer he wanted. He wasn't sure. He wasn't certain of anything except the way he felt about Hilda as he watched her graceful walk up the dark, tree-lined street.

Hilda got into the car and said: "He was in the telephone book, just as you said."

"Where does Fred Yates live?"

"Number 12 Commercial Street. Is that far from here?"

"It's a whole world away," Webbe said. "On the other side of the tracks. But it might do you good to see it."

"I don't understand why you want to talk to the turnkey of the county jail," she said. "I suppose it's because I can't take much more of your leaving me and not knowing if you'll come back. I want to go with you, this time."

"I want you with me," Webbe said. "I'll drive now."

Fred Yates' house was a small bungalow on a weedy lot bounded by the street on one side and the seawall on the other. There was a sagging picket fence in need of paint. Webbe opened the gate in the picket fence and went ahead of Hilda to the front door and looked for a bell. There was none, and he knocked.

A woman came and looked at Webbe and Hilda through the hooked screen and said: "Well, what do you want?"

"Mrs. Yates?"

"So what?"

"I was wondering if Fred is at home."

"No, he ain't."

"Do you know where I can find him, Mrs. Yates?"

"Are you from the sheriff?"

"No."

"You look familiar. I seen you some place before, mister."

"I live in town," Webbe said. "May we come in?"

"Why not?" the woman said. She shrugged and unlocked the screened



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door and stood aside to let Hilda and Webbe enter. The woman laughed as she looked at Hilda and said: "Some dump, hey? If they don't pick up for themselves, I'll be damned if I clean up for 'em."

She was a thin slovenly woman in a shapeless cotton dress that seemed a colorless gray in the light of a fringed, ornate floorlamp. The house smelled of stale cooking, fish, and the river flats. Three empty beer cans stood among the debris, also. Webbe looked at the table and said: "Have you been having company, Mrs. Yates?"

"Three days of it, mister. Sittin' around the house, playing cards and drinking beer and talkin' it up real big. And fat little Fred with them, full of great ideas. The old fool. They won back all the hundred dollars they paid for food and bed, playing poker. The damned old fool."

"Were they friends of Fred's?"

"I wouldn't know. They paid good." She suddenly became suspicious. "You're not a cop, are you?"

Webbe said: "No, not a cop."

"Maybe you're a friend of Rayke and Troy?"

Webbe said: "Maybe."

"They ain't here now, either. Third time they been out in three days, too. It's a relief to have the house to myself. Big shots, they think they are. I could call 'em something else."

Webbe said: "I think I know Rayke and Troy. I've had some dealings with them, I believe." He described the two hoodlums who had assaulted him in Newcomb's Lane, and he felt a quick press of excitement as Mrs. Yates nodded tiredly. "That's them," she said. "Been here three days, eat us out of house and home, slop up the place, and then Fred loses their board money right back to 'em, playing poker. Did you ever hear of anything so stupid? I ought to walk out on him, that's what I ought to do."

"You say they've been here for three days?"

"Seems like three years, but I guess that's all it's been."

"How did Fred get to meet them?"

She shrugged again. "Search me. It's all part of his big get-rich-quick scheme. All he does is brag and brag, about how we're goin' to be able to move out of this dump and go far away with a lot of dough and start all over again. Big talk. It don't mean a thing."

"When does Fred expect the pay-off?"

She giggled. "Tonight." Then she said: "You're pretty nosy, ain't you, mister? I don't believe you mentioned your name. Or the lady's, either."

"I'm a friend of Rayke's," Webbe said.

"You don't look like any friend of theirs."

"I'm on the same job," said Webbe.

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She looked cunning. "Maybe you're the pay-off man?"

"Maybe," Webbe said.

"You could pay me. It's as good as payin' Fred. And that way I can make sure he won't lose it right back playin' poker."

"I have to see Fred," Webbe insisted. "Where is he?"

"He had a phone call," Mrs. Yates said. "Couple of minutes ago. He's gone to Three Fingers. The gatehouse, I think he said. He figures I don't know, but I could hear his orders plain as anything. Got a good phone. Anybody could hear it, the way Fred holds the receiver to his ear. Afraid of germs." She giggled again. "Always braggin' just to cover up how scared he really is. Thinks I don't know."

"Thanks very much," Webbe said. "For everything."

"Ah, to hell with you."

Webbe went out with Hilda and walked back to the car parked at the dead end of the street. The smell of the river mud seemed fresh and wholesome after their ten minutes in Fred Yates' house.

It was eleven o'clock when Webbe reached Big Mary's landing at Ogulee Creek.

He saw Big Mary's shack, a shingled affair that looked silvery in the moonlight, leaning drunkenly beside the water; beyond it, afloat at the end of a rickety toothpick pier, was the white hull of Big Mary's oyster boat. An air of quiet desolation and poverty brooded over the place. No lights were visible. He might be walking into something that could have no way out. Then he saw the old Model A Ford parked on the other side of the shack and he walked toward it with Hilda and felt the radiator. The shell was warm. He started to turn when he heard Hilda's sudden gasp and whirled quickly and saw Big Mary seemingly risen from the ground behind him. She stood between him and the plank walk that led to the landing, and she held a shotgun in her big capable hands.

"Hold it, Webbe."

Her voice was quiet and forceful, a quick challenge that cut through the miasmic air.

"It's all right," Webbe said. "Is Rory still here?"

"He's not going anywhere for a long time."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"He's out of his head, that's what is the matter. That arm of his is all swollen. He's got to have a doctor real soon, or he'll be a dead one."

"What happened to your face?" Webbe asked. "Did he hit you?"

"Suppose he did?"

"I want to talk to him," Webbe said.

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Big Mary still barred his way. She was looking at Hilda and now she said: "What's the idea bringing her along?"

"She's with me," said Webbe. "All the way."

"You're not getting any of that money. Me and Opal got our own ideas about that."

"I don't want any of it," Webbe said. "I wouldn't touch it. And if you're smart, you'll stop trying to take it away from Rory. I just want to talk to him again, that's all."

Big Mary lowered the shotgun a little. "I guess it can't do any harm. He's in the house. But go easy, because he's kind of crazy. He's got that money in bed with him." She grinned suddenly. "He likes it better than me or Opal, I reckon. We both tried."

Webbe went past her to the sagging porch of the shack. As he pushed through the door ahead of Hilda he heard Rory's explosive curse and then a squeal of rage from Opal. Opal came backing toward the door and bumped hard into Webbe. She squealed again and turned swiftly and then stepped back from Webbe and put her hands on her hips. Her face twisted with scorn.

He looked beyond the girl into the dark shadows of the cabin. There was only one room, with a kerosene stove and several unlit kerosene lamps hanging from chains in the rough timbered ceiling. There were only a few pieces of wooden furniture, and a sleazy curtain was drawn across the room on a wire, cutting off his view of what must be the bed behind it.

Then Rory called from behind the curtain. "That you, kid?"

"Yes."

"Come in here."

"In a minute," Webbe said. He followed Opal outside and stood beside her on the oyster boat landing. "What were you planning to do, Opal?"

The girl's voice was dull. "We were hoping to try a run for it across the bay to a landing above Annapolis. Mary knows that shore like the palm of her hand. Rory figured that with his forty thousand dollars from the cannery, we'd be all right from there on. He was talkin' about Mexico."

"What went wrong?"

"Well," she said helplessly, "he's so sick he can't move. But he ain't so far out of his head that he'll let the money get out of his sight."

"Forget about the money. The best thing you and Mary could do would be to get away from here fast — and stay away."

"And leave Rory? What kind of a brother are you?"

"You're not worried about Rory. It's the money you want, isn't it?"

"If he dies, somebody is going to get it," Opal said.

"It belongs to the cannery," Webbe insisted. "It's got to go back to them."

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The girl's eyes glistened in the dim light, and Webbe saw her small tongue moisten her lips. Her face looked sharp and avaricious, like that of a spoiled child. "If anybody gets that money," she said flatly, "it's going to be me. Rory took it for me."

"And now Rory is dying," Webbe said quietly.

She looked away, to right and left, and down at her feet. "I can't help that."

"Don't you want to help him?"

"Sure. I want anything he wants." She looked up, pushed a short lock of hair back from her forehead. Her eyes were defiant. "Rory belongs to me. I lost him once, to that Kittinger woman, but nobody and nothing is going to take him from me again, you hear?"

"You could persuade him to give himself up," Webbe urged. "I think Rory honestly loves you, Opal. You could help him out of this, put him on the right path —"

"Don't preach to me," she snapped. "Rory and I are different from the rest of you."

"He's dying," Webbe said. "He needs a doctor. You can get a doctor for him, Opal."

"No," she said sullenly. "Not if it means he's got to give himself up."

"Opal," Webbe said patiently. "You know the truth. Did Rory do the killing?"

Her pink mouth sneered. "Would I tell you if I knew?"

"*Do* you know?"

"No. I wasn't with him all the time. I met him at the island the night Gannon was killed. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. I don't care. It makes no difference to me."

"Hasn't he given you any hint at all?"

She looked sullen again. "He treats me like dirt. He's still thinking about that Stella bitch."

There came a frustrated, incoherent muttering from inside the shack, a jumble of groans and curses and querulous noises. Opal cocked her small head to one side and laughed with sharp, bitter anger. "That's the way he is, until you try to reach for that bag of money he's got. Then he's like a big cat with that gun of his."

Webbe said to Hilda: "I think you'd better stay here."

Hilda's calm eyes were like islands of sanity for him. When she nodded, he went into the shack and pushed aside the sleazy curtain on its wire and looked at Rory on the big bed pushed into a corner of the room. There was a small screened window and the moonlight came softly through it to touch Rory's long body and sunken face. Crowded against the wall beyond Rory's

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shoulder was the small leather bag that Webbe had seen before. The smell of decay and gangrene was stronger than it had been previously.

"That you, Davey?"

"Yes."

"What did you come back for this time?"

"I've got to talk to you again."

Webbe heard the sound of his own voice as tense and tight as a bowstring. "Rory, you're sick."

"Yes, I'm damned sick."

"Let me get you a doctor. I could call for one, or call Dig Trury, and they can fix you up somehow before that arm gets out of control completely."

"No, Davey."

"You know what will happen if you don't get medical aid?"

"Ah, to hell with it."

"Rory, you've got to help me. This is my last chance. I want to know the truth. I think I've got it all figured out, about Merl Gannon and Luke Kittinger, too; but there are a few pieces missing. If I can clean it up, we'll both be in the clear by morning."

"What do you want to know?" Rory asked.

"I've got to know exactly how you escaped from the county jail just after I left you. I want the whole truth."

"What difference does that make?"

His brother's black eyes glittered feverishly. "Where have Big Mary and Opal gone?"

"To the boat. Never mind the girls. Answer me, Rory."

"I can't think straight. Everything is going around in my head and making an awful lot of noise."

"It's fever," Webbe said. "So I'll think for you. I know about Fred Yates, Rory. I'm pretty sure he left your cell door deliberately unlocked. It was no accident, was it?"

"I reckon not."

"Who paid him to do it?"

"I don't know."

"It wasn't you? Or Stella? Or Luke Kittinger?"

"None of them," he whispered. "I don't know who it was."

"What about the gun you first had when you went to the Prince John Cannery? Where did you get it?"

"Off Yates' desk, at the end of the cell block. Like it was there just waiting for me to take."

"That's exactly what happened, Rory. Don't you see?"

"No. I figured it was all just a break, that's all."

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"It wasn't. I think you were allowed to escape deliberately. Somebody paid Fred Yates so you'd be blamed for Kittinger's murder. The person who paid Fred Yates to let you escape is the person who killed Luke Kittinger."

"I hear Big Mary coming. Get out of the way, Davey."

"Rory, I'm going for a doctor to tend you," Mary said.

Rory lay still, with his eyes closed.

"Do you hear me?" the girl asked. "I want some money for old Doc Parsons. It will have to be a lot to keep his mouth shut about it. I'm going to take it from your bag."

The man on the bed was silent. Big Mary looked quickly at Webbe and in the pale moonlight her face was hard and triumphant. Big Mary moved swiftly around the bed and leaned over the white-painted iron footboard and reached for the black leather bag against the wall. She put her hand on it and Webbe saw Rory open his eyes and grin.

Their bodies merged in a threshing, twisting struggle of limbs. Big Mary's high, screaming curses never stopped. Then Rory suddenly groaned in pain and before Webbe could intercede again, Rory slid down under the girl's angry weight. Big Mary stepped back and started to kick at him. Webbe grabbed her and tried to hold her back, but it was like trying to restrain a wild animal. He felt the slippery heat of blood on her arm and threw his weight harder against her. She hit the wall and bounced back and suddenly scooped up the gun that had spilled from Rory's hand. Webbe tried to kick it aside, but he missed. The girl straightened, disheveled, and breathing hard. She leveled the gun at Webbe.

"Don't move, mister."

"Drop the gun, Mary," he said.

"I've been waiting a long time for him to pass out. I'm taking that money right now."

Webbe heard Opal's running feet on the plank walk outside and knelt beside Rory, sprawled on the floor. Rory was unconscious. Blood oozed from the crude bandage on his arm. Even as Webbe straightened, Rory groaned and stirred. Big Mary breathed in deeply and held the gun steady on them.

"I ought to kill him," she whispered.

"Forget it," Webbe said.

Opal came in and paused in the doorway, with Hilda behind her. Neither girl spoke as Big Mary went to the bed and picked up the black leather money bag. The locks were fastened tight, and she picked up the hatchet from the bed and slashed away at the leather straps until the bag suddenly spilled its contents to the disheveled bed.

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Big Mary cried out in dismay. Webbe heard Rory's wry, twisted laughter behind him.

The bag contained nothing but crumpled, twisted wads of old newspapers and rags.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Big Mary's voice was an infuriated, screaming tirade.

"Where is it? Where did you hide it? You had it when you came here, Rory! What did you do with the money? So help me, I'll kill you right now if you don't tell me!"

Rory grinned at her. "Look for it, honey. Look real hard. But you won't find it."

Big Mary sat down on the bed. She looked haggard and defeated. Blood seeped down her white blouse and stained her cotton skirt. Webbe moved toward Hilda and touched her shoulder. "See if you can find some clean bandages, please."

Hilda looked at him as if she had never seen him before, and then she nodded quickly and moved away. Opal started toward Rory, who still leaned against the wall. She smiled in a wheedling, promising gesture and Webbe saw Big Mary sit up straighter, her face suddenly tight and alert, as if an unspoken signal had passed between the sisters. Suddenly from the back of the shack came Hilda's quick, startled scream, and at the same moment a shot crashed thunderously from out of the dark, surrounding swamp.

The shot was followed by a man's high yell.

"Rory! Come out of there, Rory!"

Opal made a little whimpering sound and backed away from Rory. Rory moved like a big cat, springing across the room toward the blonde girl on the bed, then going past her to snatch up the shotgun. Big Mary stood up, her face white, and went to the dark window.

"Who's out there?" she called.

"Hey, Mary!" the man shouted back from the swamp. Then a deep laugh and a snicker came out of the darkness and the second man called: "We know you're in there, Rory Webbe! Throw away your gun and come out peaceful We're sheriff's deputies."

Webbe felt a jolt of recognition at the sound of the second voice. Rory cursed and knelt beside the window and his shotgun smashed out twice in quick succession, speaking back to the thick night outside. Webbe turned

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to the door and plunged outside and saw Hilda crouching near the board walk. He knelt beside her and whispered quickly: "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I saw those men and screamed, that's all."

"How many are there?"

"Two, I think."

He knelt and held her tight, feeling the quick pulse of blood in him and the need for an immediate decision. Webbe said, "Stay down," and then rose up and ran in a crouch to join Rory. Rory was on his knees by the window. Big Mary had the shotgun now.

"Have you got another gun?" Webbe whispered.

"No."

"They're not deputies. They're a couple of muscle men who have been holed up with Fred Yates, down on Commercial Street. They gave me a going-over yesterday, trying to learn where you were hiding. Named Rayke and Troy. Do you know them?"

Rory shook his head. "Where do they fit in?"

"I think I know, but I want to talk to them. Alive, Rory. Hold your fire until I can get around them."

"All right."

Webbe got up and went past Hilda without answering her whispered question and slid out through the doorway. He ran for about ten steps and then threw himself flat in the rough sawgrass that grew along the plank walk. Nothing happened. No shots were fired. He crouched and then ran forward again, toward the banks of the creek, and halted once more as one of the two men on the opposite side of the stream called out something. There was no reply from inside the shack. Webbe waited. The two men were still invisible, hidden in the thick brush alongside the stream where the path crossed over on a small bridge toward the cabin. He got up and sprinted, crouching low, and reached the bank of the dark stream about twenty yards below the crossing. He could see Plumm's sedan where he had left it when he parked, but there was no other car in sight and he assumed that the two hoodlums had left theirs at quite a distance back along the shore in order to make the rest of their trip silently on foot.

He didn't know what made him turn to look at the shack, but when he did he saw Big Mary suddenly appear in full view in the moonlight. She had the shotgun under her arm as she walked toward the footbridge. Webbe started to call out a warning and then cursed silently at what was obviously another of Rory's sudden maneuvers. For another moment the silence was like a pall over the place. Then a voice shouted to the blonde girl to drop her gun. Webbe located the sound on the opposite side of the footbridge, but he couldn't see the two men, even now. Big Mary kept walking to

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where the hoodlums were hidden and the order was repeated, louder this time. A moment later a man's figure lifted out of the brush to confront her.

It was the taller of the two hoodlums. What followed took place too fast for Webbe to prevent it, and he blamed himself for not anticipating Rory's delirious rage. The man who challenged Big Mary was a clear target in the marsh grass on this side of the creek. Rory's gun crashed twice from the shack, and then the sound was drowned out by the roar of Big Mary's shotgun as she fired both barrels into the hoodlum. The man spun around, his body arching queerly on tiptoe as he dropped his gun, and then Webbe got up and ran toward the footbridge over the creek and the other hoodlum suddenly reared up with a yell of fright and started to run away along the path through the underbrush. Webbe tackled him hard and they crashed into the dust of the path and rolled over and over into the nearby bog. Webbe glimpsed his opponent's twisted, frightened face in the moonlight and smashed at it and heard the man's gun roar in his ear. He felt stunned. A high screaming came from behind him and he struck again at the hoodlum and the man fell away from him to sprawl spread-eagle in the swamp grass. Webbe staggered to his feet and yelled at Big Mary to hold her fire, but he didn't see the blonde girl anywhere and assumed she had fallen. Footsteps came running toward him from the shack, but he turned instead toward the frightened man who slid away from him in the tall grass.

"Which one are you?" he gasped. "Rayke or Troy?"

"Joe Troy."

"Who sent you here? Who's paying you?"

The man looked beyond him and suddenly lunged to his feet and started to run away again toward the brush. Webbe saw Rory at the other end of the footbridge. Rory was trying to pull Big Mary to her feet. Webbe jumped after the hoodlum and dragged him down again at the edge of the brush. The man writhed frantically in his effort to escape.

Troy tried to knee him and Webbe hit him in the face, and then as the man wriggled aside Webbe hit him again and again.

"Tell me who hired you!"

Webbe straightened and got up off the man and picked his gun from his limp hand. Troy had passed out. Webbe opened the gun and saw it was empty and put it in his pocket. For a moment he listened to the shocked silence that hung over the scene, and then he heard the dim, distant ululation of a siren from an inland road, rising and falling through the night. He stood there, shaking, heard his name called and turned back toward the creek. Rory sat on the muddy bank of the stream, holding Big Mary in his lap. Then Hilda came running toward him. He took Hilda's arm and walked to where Rory sat with the blonde girl.

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"How is she?"

"The son of a gun shot her just when you tackled him. Do you hear those sirens?" Rory asked.

Webbe said: "It's the police from their roadblock on the main highway."

"And they're coming this way, eh?"

Webbe said: "Is Mary dead?"

"Not yet."

Webbe said: "Rory, please. Stay here. Let the cops take over. Please do that."

Rory looked down at Mary's face. Defeat bowed his wide, gaunt shoulders. "Guess I have no choice, finally. I'm not going any place now, Davey."

"The police will get you a doctor. You'll both be all right."

"Maybe. But what about you?"

Webbe turned and saw Opal standing in uncertainty nearby. The girl's face was wild with fear. The sirens sounded closer now, fierce and implacable.

"Can you handle Mary's boat, Opal?"

"I think so."

Rory said: "All right, Davey, you better run. You'll need money, so I'll tell you where it is — I hid the forty thousand under Mary's bunk on the boat." He chuckled wryly. "Use it if you can."

Webbe said: "I'm only going to Three Fingers, but I'm probably too late now."

"Better hurry, no matter where you want to go," Rory said. "I'll keep the police guessing for as long as I can. Me and Mary can explain what happened here."

The sirens were very loud. Lights flickered far away through the screen of brush. Webbe turned to Hilda and she nodded and Opal said anxiously: "All that money on the boat, all this time! Come on."

Webbe and Hilda started to run for the boat. Opal led the way.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TWENTY MINUTES LATER he rested, drenched with sweat. The oyster boat drifted quietly out of the narrow, hidden channel half a mile from the Ogulee Creek landing.

There was no alarm as they drifted across the mile-wide inlet. He couldn't know if they were being watched by anyone ashore, but the boat nosed into the sandy beach without any sign of activity from the causeway road. Webbe

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took the anchor and chunked it into the sand, then helped the two girls to the beach. Opal insisted on carrying the money wrapped in the pillow case; her face was defiant when Webbe suggested it would be just as safe aboard the boat for the time they'd be away.

Then he turned to Hilda. "Are you sure you know what to do?"

She nodded. "I only hope it works."

"It must work. But we're pretty late now." He smiled. "Are you frightened?"

"Of course."

"Be careful," he said. "Keep an eye on Opal." He kissed her.

"Suppose they ask me where I've been all this time? What shall I say?"

"I don't think anybody has missed you at Kittinger's house. Not with all that excitement since this afternoon. Just make sure about Henry Plumm, that's all."

"I'll do my best."

"And make sure Opal knows what to do."

He watched her walk away up the beach with the other girl, her figure straight in the dim, starlit silence. She didn't look back. Opal held her improvised sack of money close to her breast. When both girls were safely past the low, modern beach house where Luke Kittinger had been killed, Webbe sat down in the screen of brush nearby and lit a cigarette. He told himself to be patient.

Voices drifted faintly down the sloping lawn toward the white boathouse, and long streams of light came from the bright windows of Kittinger's house on the knoll overlooking the bay. The driveway and the garage area were crowded with parked cars, and many of them carried New York license plates. Webbe stood quietly behind a screen of hedges and forced himself to wait again, for several long minutes, while he studied the house. Hilda Brewster must have been inside for some time now, he thought. He didn't see Opal, and he could only hope now that she had gone where he had sent her instead of trying some plan to escape with the money on her own. Opal knew his plan. She had listened while he had explained it to Hilda. She knew how much he needed her, and he could only hope that she would decide to carry out her part of it.

Through the windows of the big house, Webbe glimpsed moving knots of men in earnest conversation, with here and there the uniform of a Maryland state trooper. He had been correct in his guess that Kittinger's death would bring half the executive organization down here from New York.

He waited, suddenly alert and taut, and then went around the gatehouse to the back door.

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The door was not locked. The hinges creaked slightly as he pushed inward and when he stepped inside he smelled the stale mustiness of rooms long in disuse. The two rooms were empty. Webbe started to take out the gun he had taken from Troy and remembered it was empty and put it back again. He was suddenly sure that he had come here too late.

A flight of dark stairs led upward into two low-ceilinged attic rooms, and Webbe hesitated at the foot of the steps, staring upward into the deep darkness above. Something shone mutely white halfway up the stairs and he ascended to it and picked it up. It was a crumpled cigarette butt; the tobacco still felt fresh and soft when he crushed it in his fingers. Webbe drew a deep breath and went quickly up the rest of the way to the second floor.

Fred Yates was in the tiny front room above.

Moonlight filtering through the narrow slot of a window touched the man's twisted feet and legs and glinted on the heavy gold signet ring on the turnkey's hand. The fat man's face seemed to float like some small disembodied moon in the dark shadows of the corner where he sprawled. Webbe exhaled softly and quietly and then shivered and he leaned against the door jamb, knowing he had been too late, just as he had feared, and knowing that with Fred Yates' death there was very little chance for the rest of his scheme succeeding. After a moment he crossed the room and knelt beside the turnkey's body and saw that the paunchy little man had been hit with a knife, very neatly, just under the left shoulder blade. His pudgy hands were still quite warm when Webbe touched them. The blood on his back was still wet. His face wore an expression of surprised greed, and his dead eyes seemed to roll and follow Webbe as he straightened and moved a step or two away from the body.

Now he wanted to give it all up and run. He thought of what the slatternly woman in the Commercial Street house would tell the police when the body was discovered, and he knew he wouldn't blame Dig Trury for concluding that Webbe himself had hurried here to murder the bribe-taking turnkey. He shook with anger and resentment. He knew why Fred Yates had been killed. He knew all the answers now, held them in the palm of his hand, and their weight as legal evidence didn't amount to that of a feather.

Webbe sighed and straightened and went carefully down the dark stairway and stood in the front room of the gatehouse again. He looked through the window at the big house again.

The columned porch was bathed in light, and a group of people stood outside in conversation before the tall front door. One of the men was Henry Paul Plumm.

Webbe moved closer to the window and frowned at the bright scene

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across the intervening area of dark lawns. Plumm had changed his clothes for a youthful checked coat and flannel slacks. He looked freshly shaven, his wispy hair neatly brushed, and his stance had lost its vague unsteadiness. He looked cold sober.

Then he saw Stella, her silvery golden hair gleaming in the light of the porch lamps. Cal Trotter stood beside her, big and aggressive, his crew-cut hair giving him a youthful look at odds with his narrow, predatory face. Two of the men they were talking to came down off the porch and got into a car and drove away past the gatehouse where Webbe was hidden. The others on the porch went inside, where there was already less activity than when Webb first arrived.

He waited for five minutes, smoking a cigarette in the dark safety of the musty room, and then he picked up the telephone on the floor by the window.

"Yes, sir?" a voice said.

"Let me speak to Miss Brewster, please," said Webbe.

"Just a moment, sir."

Webbe put the telephone down on the floor again and crossed the dark room to the window where he could observe the main house. He saw no unusual activity following his call. There was a crackling in the telephone behind him and he returned to it and picked it up once more.

"Hilda?"

The receiver hummed. Fear touched him and he felt sweat start out of him.

"Hilda, are you there?" Webbe asked.

Her voice came calmly. "Yes, I'm here."

"You worried me."

"Someone just passed by. Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Was Yates there?"

"He's here now," Webbe said.

"Then you aren't too late!" she said. "Did he —"

"He can't tell us anything. Not any more."

"I don't understand."

"Yates is dead," Webbe said.

Silence came spinning into the receiver.

"What happened when you walked in?" he asked.

"Nothing at all," Hilda said. "Nobody so much as missed me. It was exactly as you said it would be. Everything is quite upset around here, naturally. They just got the news about Rory's capture. The state police have taken him and the girl to the hospital up near Salisbury."

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"Good," Webbe said. "Have you seen Henry Paul?"

"Not alone. He's been talking to someone ever since I came in, and I haven't had a chance. But he saw me and nodded. He seems to be quite sober."

"Talk to him alone as soon as you can. If not, go ahead with the rest of it in five minutes. You'll know where I will be."

"Yes."

"You know what to say to Henry Paul?"

"Yes."

"Hilda?" he said.

"I love you," she said.

The telephone clicked sharply before he could reply.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Every few seconds or so, Webbe looked at his watch. He was surprised at the way time dragged. He felt taut and restless. Up in the loft over the converted barn that had been made into a hangar for Luke Kittinger's private plane, the air was heavy and lifeless, tainted with the reek of gasoline and oil and hot metal. Opal was sitting on an old workbench hugging her bundled money in her lap. Webbe sat down in deep shadow. He held the empty gun he had taken away from Troy at Big Mary's landing, and although he didn't know what good an empty gun might do, it was comforting to hold it and feel the solid weight of the smooth, oiled metal in his hand.

He had been waiting for more than twenty minutes.

Doubts troubled him. He wondered what had happened to Hilda. Perhaps her tour through Prince John with him had become known. In that case, Henry Paul couldn't cover up for her — assuming Plumm would do so — and perhaps she was even now being questioned by the police. If so, then everything was lost. And there was still the chance that Plumm might not agree to do as Hilda asked. There were too many *ifs* to the problem and he could only hope for the best. He breathed a silent prayer and continued to wait.

Someone came into the hangar.

The movement was so quick and slight a disturbance in the silent pattern of concrete floor and plane below that he almost wasn't sure that he had seen anything. He didn't move. He thought he could define a patch of

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white where there had only been thick darkness before, but nothing stirred there now. The patch of white was motionless, and after another moment he wasn't sure if it had been there before, or not.

He continued to wait.

Opal stirred and the old couch springs made a faint creaking sound and in that moment he caught another flicker of movement inside the open hangar door. It was just the faintest of images in the tail of his eye. He stood up soundlessly, flat against the wall of the stairwell, the empty gun in his hand. The ticking of the old alarm clock seemed enormously loud in the stillness. It was the only sound he could hear above the quick and sudden thudding in his ears.

A voice called up to him, very softly. "Webbe?"

"Here," he said.

Their whispers echoed like sibilant sighs in the high, empty reaches of the old barn. Webbe moved out of the shadows under the plane's stabilizers. A man stood just to one side of the port engine, his figure outlined against the moonlight on the field behind him, and Webbe saw the heavily muscled shoulders and narrow head of Cal Trotter.

Trotter saw him at the same moment and turned quickly and Webbe said: "Drop your gun, Cal."

"No."

"Drop it!"

"No."

They covered each other with their weapons, about ten feet of open floor between them. Trotter couldn't know that his own gun was empty and a mere bluff, Webbe thought. But the man's smile was a strange and devious thing.

"Hilda told me you were here, waiting for me," Trotter said.

"Did she tell you why?"

"She only said that you had a deal to offer. But is there any reason why I shouldn't shoot you now, Webbe? The cops would make a hero out of me. I wouldn't have to explain a thing, you know."

"Did Hilda tell you all of it?"

"She said you had some kind of evidence to trade for a chance to get away."

Webbe nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"Why should I bargain with you?" Trotter asked.

"If you didn't feel the need to bargain, why did you come?" Webbe countered.

Trotter didn't answer. He seemed to be listening to something. It was Opal, coming to the head of the stairs as Webbe had told her to do. She

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was not visible from where Webbe stood. She could only be heard, and Trotter's narrow head twisted suddenly and Webbe saw his gaunt face in the moonlight, startled and momentarily uncertain.

"Who is that?"

"A friend of mine," Webbe said. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

"You've done some fool things tonight, I understand."

"Where is Hilda?" Webbe asked.

"Back at the house."

"Is she all right?"

Trotter said: "Sure, she's all right. Nobody missed her this evening. I should have noticed she was gone, but I was too busy with the police after we found Luke. It was a bad mistake, I guess."

"It wasn't your only mistake," Webbe said.

"Tell me about it," Trotter said. His smile had no meaning. "Hilda said you had something to offer me."

"You were supposed to come here unarmed."

"I'm not a fool, either, Webbe. I know you'd like to kill me."

And it was true, Webbe thought.

"Before we go any further," Trotter suggested, "I should mention an offer that Stella insists on making to you. I don't know how you've managed to elude the police up to now — you've been more resourceful than I expected — but you surely know that you can't escape capture forever. Your only chance is to give yourself up. Now that Rory is in custody again, perhaps something can be arranged to suit everybody."

"And then?"

"Stella will help you."

"By telling the truth?"

"She'll change her story to indicate that you killed Luke in self-defense. And she'll pay for the best attorneys available to conduct your court case."

"But I didn't kill him," Webbe said.

Trotter laughed. "Nobody will believe that."

"I've come back to prove what really happened," Webbe said. "And I can do it."

"Yes?"

"You know that your whole story falls apart if I tell the truth," Webbe said. "You've bent every effort to frame me before I can talk to the police. There's enough evidence on my side, however, to establish a reasonable doubt in the minds of any jury that Stella is lying about Luke's death. That's why you wanted to kill me at the beach house, and why you forced me to run for it."

"What evidence do you have?" Trotter asked. "Or is it just a bluff?"

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"It's no bluff," Webbe said. "If you thought it was, you wouldn't have come here."

Trotter was silent again. Webbe felt an excitement as his hunch grew stronger. Trotter knew of a mistake he had made, one that worried him and drove him to compromise with his need to have Webbe killed and his opposite need to know what Webbe had in mind.

Webbe began to talk, using his words and his voice to cover his movement as he closed the gap slowly between them.

"Stella got you to do it, didn't she?" he asked abruptly. "You were able to ignore Luke's other wives, but Stella was different from all of them, and after Luke married her nothing was the same again. But maybe if it hadn't been Stella, something else would have touched you off. You hated being subservient to Luke, you resented his arrogant treatment of you, regardless of all your long years of faithful service. He didn't appreciate anything. You were his loyal dog, to be kicked when he was angry or annoyed, or tossed a bone when he was pleased. You were Luke's robot, his automaton, beyond any need for his humane consideration. When he told you to jump through a hoop, you jumped."

"Shut up," Trotter said harshly.

"But Stella made things different, didn't she?" Webbe went on. "I know what she's like. She showed you a different future for the first time, one you had never seriously considered before. She led you along step by step into considering the big steal. First you would steal Luke's wife, and then you would steal his fortune, and lastly you would rob him of his life itself. I'm sure Stella made it seem quite simple. You couldn't resist her. Not many men can. Are you in love with her, too, Cal?"

"Shut up," Trotter said again. "Don't talk about her."

Webbe continued: "Stella was the one who finally broached the idea of getting rid of Luke once and for all, didn't she? Maybe she caught you at a time when Luke was particularly nasty and your resentment was at its highest. It doesn't matter. She pointed out that she had a perfect man for the fall guy — my brother, Rory. I was campaigning for Rory's release on the grounds that he was a victim of Luke's sensational journalism. Everyone knew Rory had threatened revenge on Luke for what Luke had done to him for the sake of a news story. If Rory were out of jail and then Luke was found murdered, there'd be only one conclusion for a jury — or for a mob. And Rory would swing for it.

"The only trouble was that Rory was in jail and couldn't escape without help. Stella saw a way out of that by bribing Fred Yates to arrange things for Rory to escape. Maybe she told Yates that Luke was behind it, perhaps stricken by conscience; or maybe she needed only to flirt with the little fool

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and give him some money. But it was easy. Yates went along with it and unlocked Rory's cell just after I left, and he put a gun where Rory would be sure to find it and pick it up, and Rory was free."

"How do you know about Yates?" Trotter asked hoarsely.

"I know all about him. But I got here too late tonight to save him from his own greed and stupidity."

Trotter said: "What does that mean?"

"I found him in the gatehouse. Actually, everything turns on Fred Yates, doesn't it? He came here tonight when he realized that the money Stella had given him was only peanuts, considering how he had been used in a game that had millions for table stakes. He came here to shake down somebody, and since Luke is dead, it had to be someone else who had paid him to arrange for Rory's escape from jail. Nobody else on Three Fingers fits the bill except you and Stella."

"Go on," Trotter said, softly now.

Webbe drew a deep breath. "A lot went wrong with your scheme, right from the start. You expected Rory at Three Fingers immediately, right from the beginning, to revenge himself on Luke — but instead he stopped at the cannery to see his girl and he robbed the payroll there. The money made a difference. It set Rory to thinking that he might be better off if he took to his heels and quit the Shore for good. He delayed moving against Luke, and you saw you'd have to do the killing yourself. The second problem arose, then, when Merl Gannon entered the picture.

"Merl came here yesterday to talk to Luke about settling the newspaper rivalry, but Luke wasn't here and the servants had all been sent away by you to clear the ground for Luke's murder. Merl waited at the house and you and Stella weren't even aware of his presence there. He overheard you and Stella planning your next move, didn't he? And when you stumbled over him you had to keep him quiet, so you killed him. Merl was only an innocent bystander, but he was your first mistake because his death didn't fit anywhere into the picture. You tried to make it look as if Rory had killed him, but you knew it wouldn't really fit. You hid his body and his car, hoping to cover it up later, at your leisure, but I found him and brought his murder to light; and thereafter you were in deeper trouble than before, and you still had Luke on your hands."

Trotter's voice was thick. "You're guessing. Nobody can prove anything about Gannon."

"But it's a pretty good guess," Webbe said. "And it doesn't really matter whether it can be proved or not. There are other things. Like the two hoods you employed to locate Rory and find out from me if I knew where he was, You had to have Rory on the spot when Luke was killed. The two hoods.

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Rayke and Troy, could only have been hired by you. You had the organization, set up by Luke, to manhandle the *Call's* delivery trucks if it came to an out-and-out circulation war. You had the two hoods living with Yates to keep him in line, but Yates got away from them to come here tonight — and you met Yates' shakedown demand with a knife in his back."

Trotter's voice was a startled exclamation. "What? What did you say?"

Webbe pressed on without interruption. "As for Luke, he began to get the idea this morning that something was pretty wrong about Rory's escape. You didn't dare delay killing him then. Stella asked me to meet her at the beach house because you wanted another arrow to your bow — if Rory couldn't be framed as the fall guy, then I'd do just as well. But that beach house was a busy place this afternoon. Rory's girl, Opal, was there. So was Henry Paul Plumm. They saw enough to know and prove that I wasn't there when Luke was killed. Rory couldn't have done it because he was hiding out at the time from the sheriff's dogs. So you killed Luke and Stella helped you do it. She used you just as she uses everyone — to satisfy her ambition for money and power. But the whole thing still turns on Yates. His body is still at the gatehouse — you haven't had a chance to hide it. When the police discover it, there won't be any other explanation for what happened except this one that I've just given you. You're going to tell the truth, Cal. All of it. And you're going to tell it now."

Trotter cleared his throat. He hadn't moved all the time Webbe was talking. But now he said: "I was willing to make a bargain with you, if necessary. But now I think I'll have to kill you, after all."

Webbe risked a quick sidewise glance toward the hangar wall at his left. The patch of white he had seen there before was no longer visible. He heard the faintest of scraping motions and jumped forward as Trotter brought up his gun. With the same gesture he threw his own weapon at the other's face. Trotter's revolver made a smashing sound that echoed all through the big hangar. Webbe's gun hit the side of his head and Trotter staggered and then Webbe hit him with his right, with all the anger that was in him solidly behind the blow. Trotter fell against the nose of the plane and then scrambled on hands and knees over the rough concrete floor. He still held his gun. Webbe kicked at his wrist and as Trotter straightened, he hit the man again, driving him back toward the steps where Opal waited. Webbe glimpsed her form, crouching like a woodland animal, tense and predatory, ready to spring. In the dim light he saw her face. Her lips were skinned back, her teeth glistened, and there was a look almost of rapture as she watched the struggle, a hint of psychotic lust in her wild eyes.

Then Trotter's gun went off again, the muzzle pointed to the high roof. Opal made a thin sound of delight. Webbe hit the man again, blocked a wild

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left, and drove inside Trotter's guard with his fists sinking deep into Trotter's belly. He straightened Trotter with another right, saw blood burst from the man's broken nose, felt teeth splinter under his knuckles. Trotter screamed and fell back, hitting the stair rail with a crash that burst through the flimsy barrier. Webbe leaned over and dragged him to his feet.

"You and Stella framed me," he gasped.

"No."

Webbe hit him again, deliberately. "You killed Luke, didn't you? And Stella knew you were going to do it!"

"No!"

"I've got nothing to lose," Webbe grated. "I just want to hear you say it."

Then Trotter breathed, "Wait. Wait!"

Webbe had difficulty holding himself back. "You and Stella framed me, didn't you?"

Trotter nodded. "Yes."

"You killed Merl and Luke. And Stella was in it with you."

"No. She did it. Now, wait," Trotter gasped. "I'm not lying. It was arranged for me to do it, but she got impatient. She killed Merl — I didn't know anything about your partner until you found him. And I was supposed to kill Luke, but she did that, too. I don't know what gets into her — I'm afraid of her — and it's the same thing tonight, with that turnkey fellow. Stella said she would take care of him — and I guess she did."

Webbe shivered. "You're lying."

"No. She did it. She did it all. But I had to stick with her, no matter how far she went. We planned it together."

"But everything else I said was true?"

"Yes. Don't —"

Webbe let him go. He stepped back a little and called, "Henry?"

His voice echoed in the big hangar. Henry Paul Plumm came out of the shadows against the wall where he had been waiting and listening.

"I heard him, David. I heard all of it. I'll testify for you."

Webbe looked at Trotter's broken face. Opal came down the steps quickly, still holding the white sack of currency. Trotter's eyes flicked from one to the other. Defeat glazed over the pain reflected in his gaze. Plumm coughed. His bald head caught the moonlight from the field beyond the open hangar doors. His thin bony face was smiling. He touched Webbe's arm and said something that Webbe didn't hear, and then Plumm turned and looked for the gun Cal Trotter had dropped.

Another voice said: "Leave it there."

It was Stella. She stood in the hangar doorway, and she had a gun of her own. It covered them all.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

OPAL SCREAMED IN sudden terror and tried to slide along the wall toward the opposite side of the big door, clutching her improvised money bag in both hands. A gesture by Stella halted her. But it did not stop Henry Plumm. Apparently she hadn't noticed him, and when Plumm suddenly lunged past her to the open field, she could only half turn in surprise. Webbe started forward as Stella's eyes swung to his fleeing figure, but her gun checked him before he could move more than two steps. The sound of Plumm's thudding footsteps faded away.

"Who was that?" Stella asked.

"Henry Paul," Webbe said, and he grinned tightly. "Hello, Stella. I guess we've all been waiting for you."

Her eyes glittered with contempt as she looked at the ruin of Cal Trotter's nose and mouth.

"He beat you, Cal?"

"I made him tell the truth," Webbe said. "Plumm heard it all. So did Opal, here. You might stop Opal from talking, but Plumm is halfway back to the house by now. Those skinny legs of his can cover ground, Stella. They'll find Fred Yates in the gatehouse now, too."

"Yates?" she asked, frowning.

"It's all over for you, Stella."

She didn't look at him. She stared at Trotter, and said quietly: "Why didn't you kill him, instead of trying to push it all off on me?"

"He said he had evidence," Trotter mumbled.

She made a delicate snorting sound of anger. "You're a fool. Worse than I thought. No more or less than a hired handyman."

"It's all over," Webbe said again. "Put your gun away, Stella."

This time she turned to face him directly. He was surprised to see tears glistening in her amber eyes. Stella said: "Get the plane started, Cal."

Trotter said: "What for?"

"Don't ask stupid questions! Hurry!"

The big man got up uncertainly. He worked his mouth and looked at Webbe, started toward him, then went to the hangar doors and pushed them wide open. For the first time Webbe noticed the jeep parked about twenty feet away to one side of the runway. Cool night air poured strongly into the hangar from the moonlit field. Trotter went to the cabin plane and



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climbed in, and a moment later the props spun, the twin motors coughed and belched flame and roared. The sound was enormous inside the hangar. Then it eased off somewhat as the engines were throttled back to a smooth idling speed. Webbe moved out of the blast of wind from the port propeller, and Stella gestured to him with the gun, indicating that he should follow her out of the hangar.

It was easier to talk outside. He saw that Stella's face had softened, and there was an appeal in her eyes that he mistrusted.

"David, why didn't you cover up for me? Why didn't you try to understand what I had to do? I thought you loved me. We could have straightened it all out, if we'd stuck together."

"That wasn't your plan," he said. "You wanted me to hang for it."

"That's not true!"

"You know it is, Stella. What happened at the house to frighten you?"

She said in a defeated voice: "Henry Paul told the police that he'd been at the beach house before you arrived. He said he had been a coward not to tell it before, but that he had thought it all over and saw how unfair it was to you to remain silent, simply because he might become implicated. While they were talking about it, considering it as new evidence that cleared you, Plumm just disappeared. I didn't know what to do. Trotter didn't come back, and I knew you were here at the field; he had told me about Hilda's message for him. So I had to come here, too. Darling, it's up to you. You've got to help me!"

Webbe stared at her.

"Darling, it's not too late for us," she said urgently. "None of this was meant to happen. I admit that Cal and I arranged for Rory to escape, but it was only in the hope that he would take care of Luke for us. We didn't plan any murders ourselves. But it was Cal who got out of hand. He's the one who killed Gannon and Luke and Fred Yates. He's trying to blame it all on me, but it isn't so!"

"Did he admit the murders to you before?" Webbe asked.

"No. He wouldn't talk about them. And I — I just couldn't ask. But he was the one. There's something in him — I don't know. Webbe, please. You once loved me! You can't have forgotten how it used to be —"

"You made me forget. You taught me otherwise."

Her breath came fast. Something stirred in the back of Webbe's mind, a strange uneasiness, and then he saw her eyes slide beyond him, toward the far end of the field. She was expecting the police from the big house, out of sight beyond the line of cedars that edged the field. Without warning, she struck him across the face with the gun and Webbe fell down and put one hand behind him to break his jolt. He rolled over, swallowing blood,

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and started up again and saw Stella running back toward the hangar. Trotter was taxiing the plane through the doorway, turning it into the wind. Webbe got to his knees and wiped the blood from his face and saw Opal dart in terror from the empty hangar. The two women collided as Opal came unexpectedly through the big doorway, and the knotted sheet in Opal's grip came loose and spilled the packets of money over the runway. Some of it blew away in the backlash from the twin props and Opal screamed angrily and scrambled about on hands and knees, trying to retrieve it and sweep it back into her improvised bag. Stella stood absolutely still for an instant, startled by the unexpected sight of all the money. Webbe swayed to his feet. He saw Stella strike at Opal with the gun and Opal reeled away, and then Stella scooped up the money and ran with it to the plane before Opal could recover. Trotter held the cabin door open for her.

Webbe ran toward Opal. The girl was on her feet, screaming in wild frenzy at the plane. The utterly primitive hatred stamped on her face shocked Webbe.

"Let me go!"

She tore loose from Webbe's grip and ran toward the jeep parked nearby as the plane turned and trundled awkwardly onto the runway. Webbe ran after Opal and caught her as she kicked the jeep's motor into life.

"Opal!"

Her eyes were unnatural, her mouth wild. "She took the money — my money! First she took Rory, and I wanted to kill her, and now she's got the money Rory and me were going to spend in Mexico —"

"You can't stop her now, Opal."

"Get out of my way!" she screamed.

There was a knife in her hand and she slashed at him and he stared for a moment without comprehending as blood welled from the cut on his arm, appearing as if by some sleight-of-hand. The jeep lurched and threw him aside. It spun in a tight, screaming circle, then straightened and roared down the runway after the plane. Webbe tore a strip from his shirt and wrapped it around his arm. He didn't think Stella and Trotter would get far. He started across the runway, watching Opal in the jeep close the gap to the slowly moving plane, and then he halted in front of the hangar. He wiped blood from his face where Stella had struck him with her gun and tightened the bandage on his arm with his teeth. Watching the jeep, he felt everything in his mind shift and change in pattern, as if a new focus had suddenly changed his perspective. A sudden conviction rose in him that deepened and strengthened beyond denial. He felt sick. He knew the truth.

The jeep was alongside the plane now, and Trotter had already raised

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the tail, ready to leave the ground. Opal swung the little car in tight circle almost directly in front of the plane. Later, Webbe was sure that Trotter hadn't known about the girl's angry pursuit. He was taken by surprise, and his instinctive reaction was to swing the plane's tail in a desperate effort to avoid collision.

Trotter was too late. The plane slewed, lifted into the air for several moments, and suddenly turned over, skidding sidewise. The port wing crumpled as if in slow motion, and the engine hurtled across the moonlit field, narrowly missing the crop-headed girl in the jeep. Webbe started to run even before the explosion sounded.

A sheet of flame suddenly lit up the far end of the runway. The blast of exploding gasoline followed an instant later. The plane stood on its nose, then fell over on its back with a splintering crash. As he ran, Webbe saw Trotter jump out and then reach inside for Stella. Another explosion burst from the fusilage. Webbe ran as fast as he could. He ducked around Opal's jeep and tried the cabin door, but a sheet of flame licked at him and drove him back. The intense heat seared his face. He ran around the tail and shouldered Trotter aside and saw Stella trapped in the seat. He pulled hard and got her free. He fell to the ground with her, then scrambled up against the licking flames and dragged her away through the tall grass on the side of the runway. Trotter lay face down nearby. He saw that Stella was alive and breathing, and that miraculously the flames had left her virtually untouched. Then he backed off toward Opal, who still sat in the jeep. She was slumped over the wheel, her face in her hands.

The sound of the burning plane made a hungry, crackling noise. The flames lit up the field like a lurid beacon.

Webbe felt a deep, despairing heaviness in him.

"Opal . . ."

She looked at him with stricken eyes. "It's burning! The money's all gone!"

"Yes," he said. "It's gone for good. It was all for nothing, Opal. Now give me the knife."

She stared, pushed a hand through her short yellow hair. Her face worked oddly. "The knife?"

"Now. I want it."

A number of men came running across the field to the fire, but he paid no attention to them. He wanted to sit down on the rough stubble of the runway and bury his face in his arms; but he did not take his eyes off the blonde girl. She looked at him like a child, big-eyed and wondering. He heard Dig Trury shout his name, but he did not turn.

"I want the knife, Opal," he said. "The one you've used too often."

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Her mouth worked and she whispered, shrinking a little: "Then you know?"

"I just realized it."

She reached along her stockinged thigh and took out a small, delicately bladed knife with a horn handle.

"Did you kill Fred Yates with this?" Webbe asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

"And Luke Kittinger, and Merl Gannon?"

"I killed them," she said, without emotion.

"Why, Opal?" he asked. "Because Stella took Rory away from you? Because you hated her?"

"I wanted to kill her," she said. She kept looking beyond him. Her face kept changing as if in a distorted mirror — now child-like, now that of a depraved angel. "I wanted to kill Rory, too. I hated them both," she whispered. "I loved Rory once. I'd have died for him. I told you how it was with us. We didn't need the things most folks seem to need. We both liked the swamps, the water, a kind of simple living, y'know." She looked at him as if he came into sudden focus, seeking his understanding. She licked her lips. "I stopped loving Rory when he went to that fancy woman. He liked the things her money bought for her. And I was fool enough to think that if I had money, too, he'd love me again. But it didn't work out. It never would've worked. I killed them, and I guess it was for the money, and now it's all gone, all burned up, so it's no use pretending there's a chance any more."

"Were you going to let Rory take the blame for your crimes?"

She was defiant. "I wasn't going to say a word about it, ever, so long as there was a chance to get that money. Do you know what it's like to see your man go for a beautiful woman who has all the things you can't ever buy? Or to have a sister like Mary that all the men laugh at and talk about? It's like being hungry and never having enough to eat. But Rory and me, we were fine, until Stella made him crazy for her. Rory took the cannery money because I told him to. He was drunk when he came to the cannery, after busting out of jail, and I let him think he was the one who talked me into going with him after he shot the bookkeeper. I made him think he was responsible for me, and in that way I was able to stay right by all that money. But he wouldn't run away with it until he saw Luke Kittinger — or so he said. What he really wanted was to see Stella. I couldn't make him go straight away with me." She sighed. "We'd sure have had a good time."

"Why did you kill Merl Gannon?"

Her face was lusterless, her eyes seeing only the flaming skeleton of the wrecked plane.

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"Why, Opal? You went there to kill Stella, didn't you?" he guessed. "You wanted to kill her because she still had Rory wrapped up and Rory wouldn't run away with you until he saw her again. And then he might never have gone. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," Opal whispered. "I stopped loving him then. I hated him like I hated her. Rory still doesn't know I killed Gannon. He doesn't know I did any of it. Merl was an accident. Rory was down the beach when Gannon came to the boathouse. He said he'd been to Ogulee and guessed what I was going to do. I guess I talked too much to Mary and some of the people up at Ogulee, and that afternoon Merl put enough together so he wasn't so worried about seeing Luke as he was about stopping me. It was almost dark then, and he said he'd been waiting for us to show up. He told me to go straight home and leave Rory and Stella to work things out for themselves. But I wouldn't do it and then he said he'd warn them about me and I — so I killed him. I had to. He'd have told."

"Then Rory showed up?" Webbe asked.

"I pushed Merl Gannon under the boathouse just before Rory came back, and I told Rory somebody had come and killed Merl, that's all. He believed me. Rory thought I was dumb. I'm not dumb." She looked up at Webbe with big, blank eyes. "I'm not stupid at all."

"What about Luke Kittinger?" Webbe asked.

"It was the same thing. I still wanted to get Stella. I knew how Stella wanted Luke killed, and he caught me when I was telephoning to Mary in that queer new house on the Point. He started to grab me and hurt me, asking what I was doing there and where was Rory, and all that. I told him Stella was going to kill him — I got mad, I guess, I didn't mean to tell him — and then I grabbed the gun and shot him."

"You wanted Rory to run off to Mexico with you, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"But you hate him, now. Were you going to ditch him?"

"I just wanted the money," Opal said listlessly.

"So you tried to help him get away as best you could. But you'd have turned him over to the cops down there, wouldn't you?"

She looked up at Webbe with big, blank eyes again. "I was going to kill him down there. Either that, or else get the money and leave him. He couldn't do anything about it, once he ran away with me. Every cop in the world would be hunting him for murder, anyway."

"You wanted Rory blamed for Stella's murder?"

"Sure. It would've been right, wouldn't it? I was going to kill her and make it look like Rory did it. That way I'd be even with them both."

"What about Fred Yates?"

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She spoke listlessly, as if she were not interested. "I heard you tell Hilda about him, and I thought I was safe, because it's true that Stella Kittinger and Trotter were going to kill him, anyway. I thought it would cover up the other things I did, which each of them thought the other did. I knew they were mixed up about it and I guess they'd have killed Luke Kittinger anyway, one or the other of them, but I figured if I got rid of that fat little worm, the police would be sure it was them and never think of me. I didn't like Freddie, anyway," she said with sudden vehemence. "Always trying to paw me. Slobbering all over me. Then he'd go to Big Mary, all the time. He made me sick." She looked up briefly. "Anyway, I ran ahead of you to the big house and found Fred waiting there, sure enough, and I fixed him good. I just got out of the gatehouse when you came along.

"I thought if I had some nice things, and a lot of money like Stella, I could get anything I wanted. I didn't want Rory any more. Not after he went for Stella like he did. All I wanted was to get even with them both, and have the money for myself. It would've worked, too, if you'd only let Rory run away to Mexico with me like I wanted."

Webbe looked up and saw Dig Trury standing on the other side of the jeep. Opal suddenly began to cry like a child. Trury came around the jeep and said: "How did you figure it about Opal, Davey?"

"I missed her," Webbe admitted. "Until she used the knife on me just a while ago. The whole trouble here was that Stella and Trotter planned these murders, excepting Merl Gannon, and Opal just came along when they had it set up and did the job for them. Trotter was sure Stella was the one, and Stella was equally sure Trotter had done the killing. Each was sure the other was guilty, when I talked to them back at the hangar. So neither of them could have done it, even though they were guilty of murder by intent, if not actual execution."

"So it was Opal," Trury said heavily.

"It had to be."

Webbe looked at her. She looked like a child, and like a wild young thing subdued and frightened by the trap that had imprisoned her. There was no remorse and no regret in her. She would not understand how to regret what she did, Webbe thought. She had let her jealousy grow to psychotic proportions, and because of her freedom, her wild amorality, she had acted with the simplicity of a young savage, with all the bloody brutality of a savage, and the primitive cunning of one guided only by natural instincts. She did not truly understand her mistakes. Nor was she entirely to blame, Webbe thought, considering how her sister lived, considering the men she had known and the way her childhood had been one of precocious struggle.

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Dig Trury reached into the jeep and shook her and she turned submissively and climbed out to stand beside the sheriff. Webbe turned away. As Webbe walked away, he seemed to hear Opal's simple, plaintive voice long after he had moved out of earshot of the scene.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

AT NINE O'CLOCK the next morning, Henry Paul Plumm came into Webbe's bungalow. Webbe looked at his little dock where his sloop was usually berthed and remembered it was tied up at the boathouse on Three Fingers Island.

Plumm took a chair from against the bedroom wall and turned it backward and straddled it with his long, bony legs and grinned.

"Get dressed," Plumm said. "We have a busy day ahead."

Webbe put on a pair of slacks and a shirt and stood for a moment looking out over the blue water and listening to the emptiness of his little house. Plumm followed him into the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub while he shaved. His hands shook. He cut himself twice. He looked at himself in the mirror and it was like looking at a stranger. In the mirror, he could see Plumm's sharp, cynical eyes studying him.

"It's not your fault that Stella and Trotter were caught in that plane," Plumm said gently. "They're both lucky to be alive. Neither of them was burned too badly — I've already checked the hospital. The police aren't quite sure what to charge them with — conspiracy to commit murder, bribing a prison official to aid and abet Rory's escape — everything but the murders which they planned to commit and which Opal did for them. None of it would have made much difference, anyway, after I decided what I had to do. It occurred to me that even if I couldn't remember why I went to that beach house or what happened there, I still knew for a fact that you had arrived after Luke was dead. I thought at first I could keep quiet about it and stay snug and safe with my bottle, but then I knew I had to go back to the sheriff and tell him the truth. That's what I was doing at Kittinger's house last night."

"Thanks, Henry."

"No thanks required. It did me good."

Webbe grinned. "I see that you're sober today, too."

Plumm said: "I don't think I'll ever drink again. For one thing, I had an awful scare yesterday over all this. For another, I find I don't particularly

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want to drink since I'm not working for Luke any more." His intelligent eyes were fixed on Webbe as he finished dressing. "You cut it pretty fine, you know. The police didn't have anything on them, at all. You strong-armed Trotter into a confession, which I relayed to the sheriff as soon as I got back to the house, together with that business about Fred Yates. But Trotter might have squirmed out of it somehow, once he lost his panic. It was really Stella who broke, and I'd never have expected it of her. She knew Trotter had gone to the hangar to talk to you. Hilda did a good job, implying you had evidence to blow the case sky high. It threw enough of a scare into them to start them running, and that was the end, of course. It's strange how each of them thought the other guilty of the actual murders, when all the time Opal Haines was killing anyone who stood in the way of her holding on to that money Rory took."

"I didn't want it to be like that," Webbe said. He was thinking of Stella, and the past, and he didn't want to remember her any other way. "Is there any word of Rory?"

"I went up to see him in the hospital. He's doing better. The doctors are confident they can save his arm, and the girl with him will be all right, too. Rory seems changed. Much quieter. I think we can get a new trial for him, under the circumstances, and win a pardon. He wants to go back to work on the *Call*."

"What about Rayke and Troy?"

"Rayke is dead. It's county jail for the one that's alive," Plumm said. "Dig Trury got a full statement from him at six o'clock in the morning, while you were happily asleep. Admitted that Trotter hired him and paid Yates to let Rory out of jail. So there's no longer any doubt. I took the liberty of getting the *Call* photographer out of bed for the pix at the courthouse, and the story is all written and waiting for the presses at the next edition."

Webbe looked up quickly. "Are you working for me, Henry?"

"If you will have me."

"You understand, the *Call* is on the rocks. Luke's death doesn't wipe out the *Journal* and the competition it's going to give us."

Plumm nodded. "I'm aware of that. But a fellow named Gort Messinger came into the office when I got back from the courthouse with your photographer. Messinger wanted to renew his advertising contract with you. Signed him on the dotted line."

"Gort did that?"

"And a dozen others followed him. Seems the local businessmen were none too happy over the threat of mob violence in the town last night. They're all for law and order and unbroken windows. They said they re-

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sented the *Journal's* tactics in inflaming the populace yesterday, and they won't give your competition the time of day from here on out."

Webbe suddenly grinned. "I feel a lot better."

"Is it important?"

"It means the Prince John *Call* stays alive."

"Good. Then perhaps you can pay a salary to your new secretary, too."

Webbe looked at him. "What secretary?"

"If you take me on the payroll, you take Hilda, too."

Webbe got up and walked outside to the small beach and looked at the blue water of the bay. Suddenly he no longer felt alone or tired. The wind made a rustling in the tall marsh grass behind him. He watched two terns skimming low over the edge of the water in search of food, their wings motionless, carved against the delicate pressures of the light morning air. He thought of many things all at once, but most of all he thought that this was where he belonged, for now and always. He knew he would never be lonely here again. Then he thought he heard Henry Plumm's footsteps on the beach behind him and he didn't turn for a moment. When he did, he saw it was Hilda.

She halted when he turned, and he saw the way the wind blew her skirt around her long legs and the way it tangled in her dark, coppery hair, and he wondered why he should envy the wind and the sun that touched her face. Then he started back across the beach toward her and he saw the girl and his house and the wide sweep of land and water all at once, and he stopped walking and just stood looking at it all for a long moment.

Then he ran to meet her.

THE END

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